SMITH

OTHER DIMENSIONS

ARKHAM HOUSE

OTHER DIMENSIONS

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

OTHER DIMENSIONS

***by* CLARK ASHTON SMITH**

$6.50

OTHER DIMENSIONS

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

This final collection of the short stories of Clark Ashton Smith contains no less than 26 tales—science-fiction, horror, fantasy—the domains that Smith made uniquely his own.

Here are *Marooned in Andromeda* and *The Immeasurable Horror, The Metamorphosis of Earth* and *The Dimension of Chance, The Venus of Azombeii* and *The Mahout, The Kiss of Zoraida* and *The Ghost of Mohammed Din,* among others. Every story in this collection demonstrates anew Smith's mastery of the fantastic tale—his prose style has no peer in our time—his fertile imagination remains fresh and unexcelled—and his way with language creates a mood of utter strangeness.

With the passage of time, the work of Clark Ashton Smith is coming increasingly into its own—an ever larger audience is beginning to appreciate the qualities that were his alone, in prose and in verse—and today, almost a decade after his death, his work is beginning to see print in German and French editions, as well as in paperback under the Ballantine imprint.

The tales in this volume have not hitherto been collected. They represent all the fiction left to be published in book form.

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The jacket is the work of Lee Brown Coye.

by CLARK ASHTON SMITH

THE STAR-TREADER AND OTHER POEMS
ODES AND SONNETS
EBONY AND CRYSTAL—POEMS IN VERSE AND PROSE
SANDALWOOD
NERO AND OTHER POEMS
THE DARK CHATEAU
SPELLS AND PHILTRES
THE HILL OF DIONYSUS—A SELECTION
¿DÓNDE DUERMES, ELDORADO? Y OTROS POEMAS
POEMS IN PROSE
THE DOUBLE SHADOW AND OTHER FANTASIES
OUT OF SPACE AND TIME
LOST WORLDS
GENIUS LOCI AND OTHER TALES
THE ABOMINATIONS OF YONDO
TALES OF SCIENCE AND SORCERY
OTHER DIMENSIONS

in preparation: SELECTED POEMS

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961) spent all his life in his native California. He was born in mining country, at Auburn, east of Sacramento, and lived there for most of his life previous to his marriage to Carol Dorman, when he moved to Pacific Grove, where he died. Smith was widely known as a lyric poet of great distinction before most of his contemporary fantasistes had begun to make their reputations, though he came into his own as a writer of memorable macabre short stories and freshly imaginative science fiction in the 1920's and 1930's. In addition to writing, Smith painted and created unique and fantastic sculptures, now much sought after by collectors.

Though almost entirely self-educated, Smith was widely published during his lifetime. His markets included *The London Mercury, The Yale Review, Munsey's, Strange Tales, Smart Set, The Black Cat, Poetry, Weird Tales, The Arkham Sampler, Wonder Stories, Amazing Stories, Comet Stories, La Paree,* and many other magazines. During his lifetime he published seven collections of poems—*The Star-Treader and Other Poems, Ebony and Crystal, Sandalwood, Odes and Sonnets, Nero and Other Poems, The Dark Chateau, Spells and Philtres*—and four of short stories—*Out of Space and Time, Lost Worlds, Genius Loci and Other Tales,* and *The Abominations of Yondo.*

Other Dimensions is the third collection to be published posthumously; it was preceded by *Poems in Prose* and *Tales of Science and Sorcery;* it will be followed by *Selected Poems* and an omnibus, *The Best Fantastic Tales of Clark Ashton Smith.*

* * * * * *

The portrait of Clark Ashton Smith on the back of the jacket is a self-portrait drawn in his third decade.

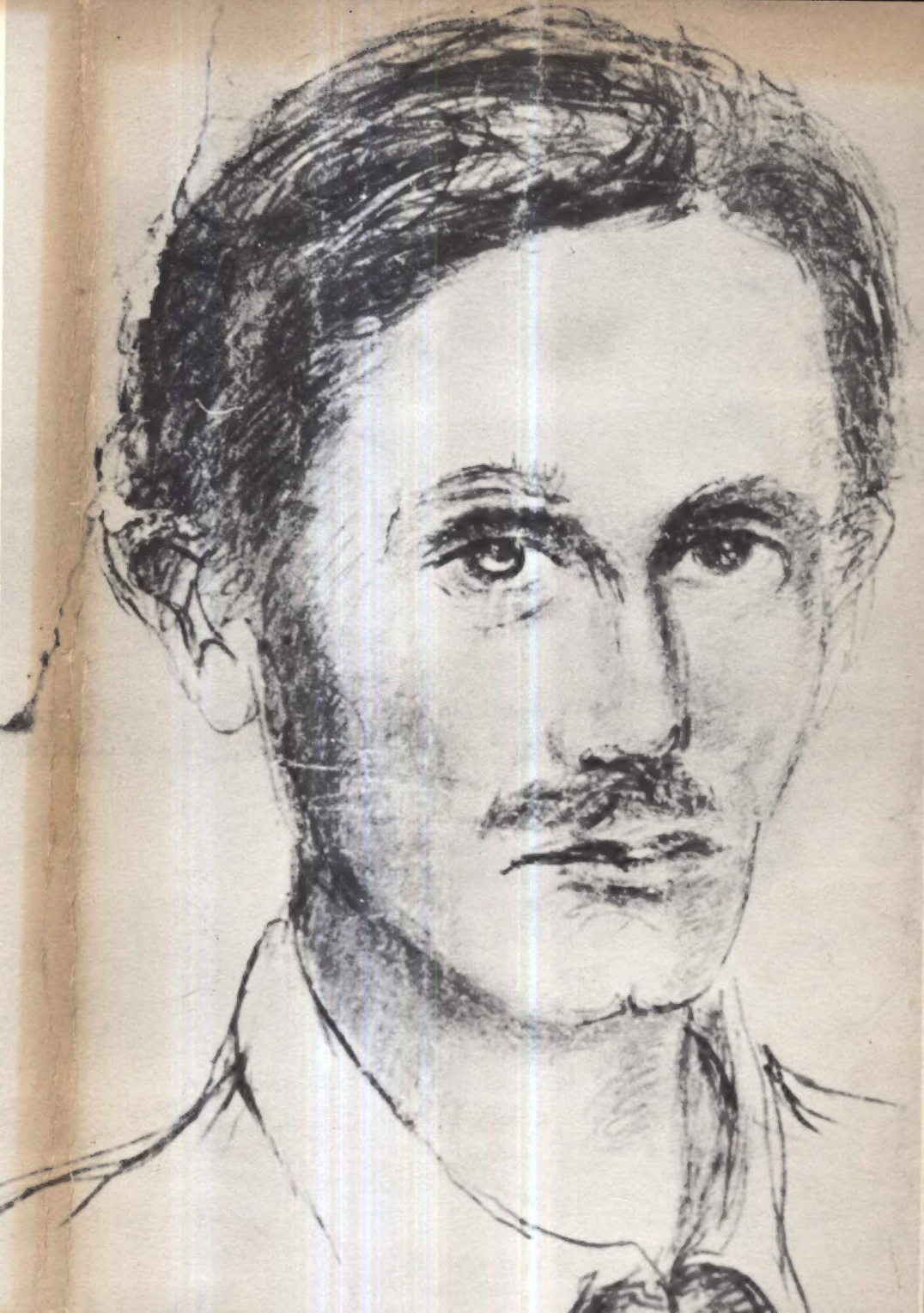
ARKHAM HOUSE
Sauk City, Wisconsin

OTHER DIMENSIONS

by **Clark Ashton Smith**

ARKHAM HOUSE: Publishers
Sauk City, Wisconsin

1970



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OTHER DIMENSIONS

MAROONED IN ANDROMEDA

"I'M GOING to put you fellows off on the first world of the first planetary system we come to."

The icy deliberation of Captain Volmar's tones was more terrible than any show of anger would have been. His eyes were chill and sharp as the sapphire lights in snow; and there was a fanatic rigor in the tightening of his lips after the curtly spoken words.

The three mutineers looked sullenly at each other and at the captain, but said nothing. The levelled automatics of Volmar and the three other members of the space-flier's crew, made all appeal or argument seem absurd. They knew that there could be no relenting on the part of that thin, austere mariner of the interstellar gulfs, who had dreamt of circumnavigating space and thus becoming the Magellan of the constellations.

For five years he had driven the great vessel further and further away from the earth and the solar system, which had long ago dwindled into points of telescopic light—for five years he had hurled it onward at more than the speed of cosmic rays, through the shoreless, bottomless night, among the shifting stars and nebulae. The configuration of the skies had changed beyond all recognition; the Signs were no longer those that are known to terrestrial astronomers; far-off stars had leapt into blazing suns and had faded back to stars; and there had been a flying glimpse of stranger planets. And year by year the cold terror of the endless deeps, the vertiginous horror of untold infinitude, had crept like a slow paralysis upon the souls of the three men; and a nostalgia for the distant earth had swept them with unutterable sickness; till they

could bear it no longer, and had made their hasty, ill-planned attempt to secure control of the vessel and turn it homeward.

There had been a brief, desperate struggle. Forewarned by a subtle instinct, Volmar had suspected them and had been in readiness; and he and the men loyal to him had armed themselves furtively in preparation, while the others had made their attack bare-handed, man to man. All of the mutineers were wounded, though not seriously, before they could be subdued; and blood dripped from their wounds on the floor of the flier, as they stood before Volmar.

Albert Adams, Chester Deming and James Roverton were the names of the mutineers. Adams and Deming were quite young, and Roverton was now verging upon early middle-age. Their very presence in Volmar's crew was proof of intellectual ability and prime physical fitness, for all had been subjected to examinations of the most rigorous and prolonged order. A high knowledge of mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy and other branches of science had been required, as well as a mastery of mechanics; and perfect sight, hearing, equilibrium and a flawless constitution were likewise requisite. Also, it goes without saying that they belonged to a most active, adventurous type: for no ordinary men would even have volunteered for such a project as Volmar's. Innumerable voyages had already been made to the moon and the nearer planets; but, previous to this, aside from the one trip made to Alpha Centauri by the Allen Farquhar expedition, no one had dared the outer deep and the constellations.

Volmar and the three who had remained faithful to him were all of the same breed: men of religious, well-nigh inhuman devotion to an idea, scientists to whom nothing mattered apart from science, who were capable of martyrizing themselves and others if by so doing they could prove a theory or make a discovery. And in Volmar himself there was a spirit of mad adventure, a desire to tread where no man had been before; the cold flame of an imperial lust for unexplored immensitude. The mutineers were more human; and the years of bleak confinement in the space-flier, among the terrific pits of infinity, remote from all that is life to normal beings, had broken down their morale in the end. Few, perhaps, could have endured it as long as they.

"Another thing," the chill voice of Volmar went on: "I shall put you off without weapons, provisions or oxygen-tanks. You will have to shift for yourselves—and of course, the chances are that the atmosphere, if

there is any, will prove unfit for human respiration. Jasper will now proceed to truss you up, so that there won't be any more foolishness."

Alton Jasper, a well-known astronomer, who was first mate of the flier, stepped forward and bound the hands of the mutineers behind them with rope. Then they were locked in a lower apartment of the vessel, above the man-hole that gave entrance and egress. This apartment was insulated from all the rest; and the manhole could be opened from the higher rooms by means of an electrical device. There the mutineers lay in absolute darkness, except when someone entered with a meager allotment of food and drink.

Aeons seemed to pass, and the three men abandoned all efforts to keep a reckoning of time. They spoke little, for there was nothing to speak of but failure and despair and the dreadful unknown fate ahead of them. Sometimes one of them, particularly Roverton, would gallantly try to crack a jest; but the laughter that answered the jest was the last flare of a courage tried almost beyond human endurance.

One day, they heard the voice of Volmar addressing them through the speaking-tube. It was far-off and high and thin, like a voice from some sidereal altitude.

"We are now approaching Delta Andromedae," the voice announced. "It has a planetary system, for two worlds have already been sighted. We shall make a landing, and put you off on the nearest one, in about two hours."

The mutineers felt a sense of comparative relief. Anything, even sudden death from the inhalation of some irrespirable atmosphere, would be better than the long confinement. Stoically, like condemned criminals, they prepared themselves for the fatal plunge into the unknown.

The black minutes ebbed away, and then the electric lights were turned on. The door opened, and Jasper came in. He removed the bonds of the three men in silence; then he retired, and the door was locked upon them for the last time.

They were aware, somehow, that the flier had slackened its speed. They tried to stand up, with their stiffened limbs, and found it hard to maintain their equilibrium, for they had long been habituated to a rate of movement far beyond that of any cosmic body. Then they were aware that the vessel had stopped: there was a sudden jolt that flung them against the wall, and a cessation of the engines' eternal drone. The silence was very strange, for the throbbing of the great electromagnetic

motors had long been as familiar to them as the beating of their own blood.

The man-hole opened with a harsh, metallic screech, and there was a faint glimmering of bluish-green light from without. Then there came a gust of acrid air, and a waft of indescribable smells that were unlike anything on earth. The mutineers heard the voice of Volmar once more:

"Out with you—and make it quick. I've no more time to waste on rubbish."

Holding his breath, Roverton approached the man-hole, crawled through, and climbed down the steel ladder that ran along the outer side of the flier. The others followed him in turn. They could see little, for apparently it was night in the new world on which they were being landed. They seemed to hang over an indefinite abyss with no bottom, but on reaching the end of the ladder, they found solid earth beneath their feet. The air, though sharp and unpleasant to the nostrils, was apparently breathable. They took a few careful steps, keeping close together, on a surface that was smooth and level to their tread. While they were trying to adjust their senses to the dim surrounding, they saw the vague bulk of the flier begin to move, and then heard the prodigious roar of its ascent to the skies.

"Marooned!" said Roverton, with a short laugh. "Well, there's one safe bet—we're the first mutineers who have ever been put off in Andromeda. I vote that we make the most of the experience. The air hasn't killed us yet, so evidently it contains a proportion of hydrogen and oxygen not too dissimilar from that of the earth's atmosphere. And, with such air, there is a good chance of finding plant-life, or even animal-life, of types that will afford edible substances."

The three men peered about, straining their eyes in an effort to penetrate the blue-green darkness. None of them was unimaginative; and they felt the thrill of an eeriness beyond all parallel, an overpowering strangeness that preyed upon their nerves with a million intimations of unrevealed and formless things never before conceived by man. Their situation was unthinkably desolate; but behind the desolation there seemed to lurk the multitudinous and multiform teeming of unearthly life. However, they could see nothing tangible, except some vague unmoving masses that resembled large boulders. The air was a little chill, and its acrid character became more noticeable, in unison with a peculiar darkness.

The skies above were faint and vaporous, with a few stars glowing

dully in their depths. Some of the stars were momentarily obscured and then disclosed, as if there were some movement or change in the occluding medium. Everywhere there was the sense of abysmal and immeasurable distance; and the mutineers were conscious of an odd, terrific vertigo, as if the horizontal spaces on all sides might draw them in like some unfathomable gulf.

Roverton stepped forward toward one of the boulder-like masses, taking careful note of the gravitational pull exerted by the ground. He was not quite sure, but thought that he experienced a sense of weight, of difficulty in locomotion, slightly beyond that which is felt on our earth.

"I think this world is a little larger or heavier than our own," he announced. The others followed him, and were aware of like sensations. They stopped uncertainly, wondering what was to be done next.

"I suppose the sun will rise some time," observed Deming. "Delta Andromedae is a sizable affair, and seemingly the warmth it affords is comparable to that of our sun. Doubtless it will yield a similar illumination. In the meanwhile we might as well sit down and wait, if this is a bona fide boulder."

He seated himself on the dark mass, which was almost circular in form and was perhaps eight feet in diameter by three in height, with a gently rounded top. The others followed suit. The object seemed to be covered with a sort of thick, shaggy, resilient moss.

"This is luxury," exclaimed Roverton. "I'd like to take a nap." Neither he nor any of the others, however, was in any state to permit of slumber. All were ungovernably excited by the novelty of their position, and were aware of a terrible disquietude, a wild nervousness due to the shock of being plunged among alien atmospheric and geologic forces, the magnetic emanations of a soil untrod by human foot. Of this soil itself they could determine nothing, except that it was moist and was apparently devoid of grass or plant-forms.

They waited. The darkness was like the slow oozing of a cold, glaucous eternity. The mutineers carried watches, which perforce had run down during their period of incarceration. They wound and set these watches going, and struck a match occasionally to note the passage of time—a proceeding which struck them all with its absurdity, since there was no means of knowing whether or not the twenty-four hours of the terrestrial day would correspond in any manner to the diurnal period of this new world.

Hours dragged on. They talked with sporadic and feverish loquacity,

in an effort to fight down the nervousness of which all were uncontrollably conscious. Strong and mature men though they were, they felt at times like children alone in the dark, with a horde of monstrous unknown terrors pressing about them. When silence fell, the unformulable weirdness and horror of the environing gloom seemed to draw closer; and they dared not be still for very long. The hush of the dim heavens and the dimmer ground was oppressive with unimaginable menace. Once, they heard a far-off sound, like the whirring and jarring of a rusty crank. It soon ceased, and was not repeated; but at long intervals there were sharp, tiny stridulations, like those of insects, which appeared to come from the nearer distance. They were so high and harsh that the teeth of the three men were actually set on edge by them.

Suddenly, they all perceived that the darkness was beginning to lighten. A chill glimmering crept along the ground, and the boulder-like masses defined themselves more clearly. The light was very peculiar, for it appeared to emanate from the soil and to tremble upward in visible waves like those of heat. It was faintly iridescent, like the nimbus of a cloudy moon; and, gathering strength, it soon became comparable to earthly moonlight in its illuminative power. Beneath it, the soil displayed a greenish-grey color and a consistency resembling half-dried clay. The sides of the boulder-forms were plainly lit, through their tops remained in shadow. The moss-like substance covering them was of a purple hue, and was very long and coarse and hairy.

The mutineers were greatly puzzled by the light. "Is it some sort of radio-activity?" queried Roverton. "Is it phosphorescence? Is it due to some luminous micro-organism—a kind of *noctiluca?*"

He stooped down and peered closely at the trembling waves of iridescence. He gave an exclamation. The light, as it rose, seemed to be full of infinitesimal motes, which hovered about a foot from the ground at their highest flight. They poured unceasingly to this level in teeming millions.

"Animaculae of some unknown kind," decided Roverton. "Evidently their bodies are highly luminescent—one could almost read a book by this light." He took out his watch and found that the figures were clearly distinguishable.

After awhile the weird luminosity began to subside, and ebbed along the soil as it had come. The re-established darkness, however, was not of long duration. Soon the landscape declared its outlines again; and

this time the illumination came in a normal manner, like the twilight of a misty dawn. A plain with barely perceptible undulations, and having scores of the boulder-forms scattered about it, was now visible for some distance, till it was lost among the streamers of curling vapor that rose all about. A sluggish, leaden-colored stream ran through the plain, about two hundred feet from where Roverton and his fellows were sitting, and vanished in the mist.

Soon the vapors, hueless at first, were tinged with deepening colors, pink and saffron and heliotrope and purple as if an aurora were rising behind them. There was a brightening in the center of this prismatic display; and it was surmised that the solar body, Delta Andromedae, had now ascended above the horizon. The air grew rapidly warmer.

Seeing the nearby stream, the men all realized that they were excessively thirsty. Of course, the water might not be drinkable; but they decided to chance it.

The fluid was peculiarly thick, milky and opaque. The taste was a trifle brackish; but nevertheless, it allayed their thirst; and they felt no immediate ill-effects.

"Now for breakfast, if we can find it," said Roverton. "We lack nothing but food-stuffs, utensils and fuel."

"I can't see that we'll find any by staying where we are," observed Adams. "Of all the desolate holes! Let's go."

A discussion arose as to which direction they should take. They all sat down again on one of the mossy purple masses, to decide the momentous problem. The landscape was equally barren and dreary on all sides; but at last they agreed to follow the flowing of the leaden stream, which ran toward the auroral display. They were about to rise, when the boulder-form on which they were sitting seemed to heave upward suddenly. Adams found himself sprawling on the ground, but the other two were quick enough to save themselves from a like fate. Startled, they leapt away; and turning back, they saw that the great mass had opened, as if cloven through the center, revealing an immense hollow lined with a whitish material that resembled the interior of an animal's stomach. The material trembled incessantly, and a glutinous liquid welled from within it, like saliva or digestive fluid.

"Heavens!" ejaculated Roverton. "Who ever dreamt of anything like that? Is it plant, animal, or both?"

He approached the mass, which gave no sign of movement apart

from the trembling. Apparently it was rooted, or deeply embedded in the ground. As he drew near, the production of the glutinous liquid became more copious.

A sharp stridulation, similar to the noises heard during the night, was now audible. Turning, the mutineers saw a most singular creature flying toward them. It was large as a Chinese teal, but presented the general appearance of an insect rather than a bird. It had four large, pointed, membranous wings, a fat grub-like body marked off into segments, a thin head with two black periscope-like attachments rising above it, a dozen long intricate antennae, and a greenish-yellow beak shaped like that of a parrot. The body and head were a loathsome verminous gray. The thing flew past Roverton and lit on the substance he had been inspecting. Crouching down on four short, rudimentary legs, it started to sip the fluid with its beak, trailing its wings as it did so. The fluid welled as if in waves, and the wings and body of the creature were soon glistening with slime. Presently it ceased to sip, its head sank in the fluid, it struggled feebly to free itself, and then lay still.

"Ugh!" said Deming. "So that's the idea. A sort of Andromedan pitcher-plant or fly-trap. If the flies are all like that we'll need tennis-rackets for swatters."

As he spoke, three more of the insect creatures flew past, and began to repeat the actions and the fate of their predecessor. No sooner were they securely imprisoned, when the shaggy mass proceeded to close itself till the white lining was no longer discernible. The cleavage where it had opened could barely be detected; and once more the thing presented the appearance of a mossy boulder. Looking about, the mutineers saw that others of the purple masses had opened and were awaiting their victims.

"Those things could easily devour a man," meditated Roverton. "I'd hate to be caught in one of them. Let's get out of this if there is a way out."

He led the way along the sluggish stream. As they went, they saw many more of the gigantic flying insects, which paid no apparent attention to them. After they had gone a few hundred yards, Roverton almost trod on a black creature shaped like an enormous blindworm, which was crawling away from the stream. It was three feet long. Its movements were extremely torpid, and the men passed it with a shudder

of repulsion, for the thing was more loathsome than either a snake or a worm.

"What's that?" Roverton had stopped, and was listening. The others also paused and listened intently. They they all heard the sound of dull, muffled blows, at an indeterminate distance in the fog. The sound was quite rhythmic in its repetition, but ceased at intervals. When it stopped, there was a sharp, shrill, multitudinous cheeping.

"Shall we go on?" Roverton had lowered his voice cautiously. "We're without weapons; and hell knows what we'll get into. We may find intelligent beings; but there's no means of knowing beforehand whether or not they will prove hostile."

Before his companions could answer, the fog parted and revealed a singular spectacle. No more than a hundred yards down the stream, a dozen pygmy-like beings, about two feet in height, were gathered around one of the purple masses. With instruments whose general form suggested knives and axes, they were cutting away the moss-like integument from the mass and hewing great slabs of the white fleshy material within. Even at that distance, it could be seen that the mass was quivering convulsively, as if it felt their blows.

Suddenly the hewing was suspended. Once more the cheeping sound arose. The pygmies all turned and seemed to be gazing toward Roverton and his companions. Then the sound changed and took on a high, chirping note, like a summons. As if in answer, three monstrous creatures appeared from the fog. Each of them was twenty feet in length, they were like fat lizards in their general form and had an indefinite number of very short legs on which they crawled or waddled with amazing swiftness. Each of them had four saddles of a fantastic type arranged at intervals along its back. They crouched down, as if at a word of command, and all the pygmies swung themselves with incredible celerity into the saddles. Then, to an accompaniment of shrill pitterings, the unearthly cavalcade advanced upon the travelers.

There was no time to even think of fleeing. The speed of the lizard-creatures was far beyond that of the fleetest runner: in a few instants they loomed upon the three men, surrounding them and hemming them in with their mammoth length. The creatures were both grotesque and terrible, with their squat, toadlike heads and their puffed bodies mottled in sinister designs with dull blues and rusty blacks and clayish yellows.

Each of them had a single bulging eye that glowed with a ruddy phosphorescence in the middle of its face. Their ears, or what appeared to be such, drooped along their jowls in wrinkled folds and hung down like wattles.

Their riders, seen close at hand, were equally bizarre and hideous. Their heads were large and globular, they were cyclop-eyed, but possessed two mouths, one on each side of an appendage like the trunk of an elephant, which depended almost to their feet. Their arms and legs were of the normal number, but seemed to be very supple and boneless, or else had a bone-structure radically different from that of earth-vertebrates. Their hands were four-fingered and were webbed with translucent membranes. Their feet were also webbed, and terminated in long, curving claws. They were altogether naked; were seemingly hairless; and their skin displayed a leaden pallor. The weapons they carried were made of some purplish metal, colored like permanganate of potash. Some were halberds with short handles; and others were crescent-shaped knives weighted at the top of the blade with heavy knobs.

"God!" cried Roverton. "If we only had elephant-guns and automatics!"

The pygmies had stopped their mounts and were gibbering excitedly as they stared with their round orbs at the earth-beings. The sounds they made were scarcely to be duplicated by human vocal chords.

"Mlah! mlah! knurhp! anhkla! hka! lkai! rhpai!" they chattered to each other.

"I guess we're as much of a novelty to them as they are to us," observed Adams.

The pygmies seemed to have arrived at a definite decision. They waved their weapons and chirped, and their lizard-steeds swung round in a semi-circle till all were in a position upstream from the mutineers. They they advanced, and the pygmies pointed onward with their weighted knives and halberds as if enjoining the men to precede them. There was nothing to do but obey, for the lizard-creatures opened yawning mouths that were fanged like caverns of stalactites and stalagmites, when they drew near. Roverton and his fellows were forced to proceed at a marathon-like pace in order to keep ahead of them.

"They're herding us like cattle!" Roverton cried.

When they came abreast of the purple-covered mass which the pygmies had been hewing into slabs, a halt was made and the slabs were

loaded into large panniers which were then attached to the backs of the monsters by means of a curious harness that looked as if it were wrought of animal intestines. The men were herded in the center of the cavalcade while this work was going on. There was no possible escape; and they resigned themselves with as much scientific calm as they could muster.

After the loading had been accomplished, the pygmies resumed their advance along the stream, driving their captives before them. The fog had now begun to lift and disappear, and a dim yellow solar orb, slightly larger than our sun, became discernible low in the heavens above a remote horizon of serrate peaks. The river turned abruptly after a mile or so and wound away through the desolate plain toward a large lake or sea that filled the further distance with a semi-hue of dull purple. Here the cavalcade left the stream, marshalling its prisoners toward the far-off mountains.

The landscape grew barer and even more desert-like in its character as Roverton and his companions stumbled onward before the gaping maws of the monsters. There were no more of the insect-devouring shaggy masses, nor even insects themselves nor any other forms of life. The plain was like a vast level of dried primordial ooze, or the bed of some vanished ocean.

Hunger and weariness assailed the men. They were driven ever onward at a merciless, unremitting pace, till they panted for breath and their muscles grew leaden with fatigue. Hours seemed to pass; but the dim sun rose no higher above the horizon. It swung in a low arc, like the sun of sub-polar lands. The mountains drew no nearer, but receded on the vast vague skies.

The plain began to reveal details hitherto unnoticed. Low hills sprang up, the undulations deepened. Bare ravines of dark, sullen, semi-basaltic stone intersected it at intervals. Still there were no signs of life, no plants, no trees, no habitations. The mutineers wondered wearily where they were being taken, and when they would reach the destination sought by their captors. They could not imagine what it would be like.

Now they were driven along a ravine in which ran a rapid stream. The ravine grew deeper; and sheer cliffs, increasing in height to a hundred feet or more, hemmed it in on each side. Rounding a sharp turn, the men saw before them a broad space of level shore, and above the

shore a cliff that was lined with several rows of cavern-mouths and little steps cut in the stone. Dozens of pygmies, of the same type as their captors, were gathered before the entrances of the lower caves. An animated chattering arose among them at sight of the cavalcade and its prisoners.

"Troglodytes," exclaimed Roverton, feeling in spite of his fatigue the keen interest of a man of science. He and his companions were immediately surrounded by the pygmies, some of whom, on closer inspection, appeared to be of a different sex from the ones they had first encountered. There were also a few infants, the smallest of which were little larger than guinea-pigs.

The members of the cavalcade dismounted and proceeded to unload the panniers with the assistance of the others. The slabs of fleshy white substance were piled on the ground beside several large flat mortars of stone. When the unloading was completed, the pygmies laid some of the slabs in these mortars and began pounding them with heavy pestles. They made signs to the men, enjoining them to do likewise.

"I suppose the stuff is used for food," surmised Adams. "Maybe it's the staff of life among these creatures." He and the others selected pestles and started to pound one of the slabs. The material was easily reduced to a fine, creamy paste. It gave off a pungent odor that was far from unpleasant; and in spite of certain highly repulsive memories the three men became conscious that they were extremely hungry.

When all the mortars were full of paste, the pygmies began to devour it without any further formality, using not only their webbed hands but their prehensile trunks to convey the stuff to their double mouths. They motioned to the men that they also should eat.

The paste had a saline flavor and vaguely resembled a mixture of sea-fish with some nutritious root-vegetable. It was quite palatable on the whole; and it served to allay the pangs of hunger in a fairly satisfactory manner. At the end of the meal a sort of fermented beverage, yellow-green in color, was brought out in shallow vessels of earthen-ware. The taste was disagreeable and very acrid; but all fatigue disappeared after a few sips; and the mutineers were able to survey their situation with new hopefulness and courage.

Several hours were now spent in pounding up the reminder of the slabs. The paste was stored in broad-mouthed urns and these urns were carried into the lower caves. Roverton and his comrades were signed to

assist in this work. The caves were too low to permit their standing upright and were very dark and shadowy, with many ramifications of irregular size. The furnishing were quite primitive, as was to be expected; though there was a welcome degree of cleanliness. They were full of a smoke-like smell, and in one of them a little fire was burning. The fuel resembled some sort of peat. There were tiny couches covered with furless skins, probably those of creatures similar to the lizard-things.

The low sun had gone down behind the cliffs when the last urn was carried into the caverns. A cold green twilight gathered along the streams, thickened by the rising wispy vapors. The lizard-monsters were led away to a cave larger than the rest, lying at some distance apart. Obviously it served as a stable. Then the pygmies retired by twos and threes to their caverns, after indicating a grotto which the men were to occupy. Four pygmies, armed with their queer halberds and heavily weighted knives, remained on guard in front of the entrance.

Darkness flowed into the grotto like a rising sea of stealthy silent ripples. With its coming, an odd lethargy overpowered the men—a reaction from all the stress and strain and hardship they had endured, from the tax of all the new, unearthly impressions their nerves had sustained. They stretched out on the stone floor, using the little couches along the wall for pillows. In a few minutes they were asleep.

They awoke with the sound of myriad cheeping and chatterings outside their cavern in the pale mistiness of dawn.

"Sounds like a caucus," surmised Roverton as he crawled toward the entrance. Peering out, he saw that more than a hundred pygmies, half of whom must have come from some other community, were collected on the stream-bank and were seemingly engaged in an earnest debate. All of them kept looking with their round orbs toward the cave occupied by the mutineers. Their words, expressions, gestures, were so remote from anything familiar to humanity, that it was impossible to guess the trend or import of their debate, or to know whether the decision at which they were arriving was friendly or inimical.

"They give me the creeps," said Deming. "We don't know whether they're going to eat us or elect us for their tribal deities."

Apparently at a word of command, the guards approached the cavern-mouth and motioned the men to come forth. They obeyed. Platters full of the white paste and cups of a sweetish ebon-black beverage were

set before them; and while they ate and drank, the whole assemblage looked on in silence. Somehow, there seemed to be a change in the attitude of the pygmies; but the nature of the change, or what it might portend, was beyond surmise. The whole proceeding was extremely mysterious and had almost the air of some sinister sacrament. The black beverage must have been mildly narcotic, for the men began to feel as if they were drugged. There was a slight deadening of all their senses, though their brain-centers remained alert.

"I don't like this," murmured Roverton. He and the others felt a growing disquietude, for which they could assign no determinate reason. They were not re-assured when the three lizard-monsters, followed by two more of a similar type, re-appeared along the stream-bank. All were mounted by armed pygmies who, when they approached, made signs that the men should precede them along their line of march. The mutineers started down-stream, with the mounted guards and the whole assemblage following them.

Soon the bank grew narrower and the walls above more precipitous. The foothold narrowed to a yard-wide path, beside which the waters rushed with sullen vehemence in a series of torrential rapids teethed with yellow foam. Passing a turn in the wall, the men saw that the bank ended in a large cavern-mouth. Beyond, the cliffs rose perpendicularly from the torrent.

The three hesitated as they neared the cavern. What fate was before them they could not conjecture; but their sense of alarm and disquietude increased. They looked back and saw that the foremost lizard-thing was close upon them, yawning more horribly than the black cave in front. They thought of leaping into the stream; but the headlong torrent was full of sharp rocks; and a roaring from beyond the cliff betokened the nearness of a waterfall. The walls above the path were impossible to climb; so they entered the cavern.

The place was quite roomy in distinction to the caves inhabited by the pygmies, and the men were not forced to stoop at any time. But, blinded with the daylight they had left, they stumbled over stones and against the winding walls as they groped in utter darkness. A gust of chill and noisome air came forth like a subterranean wind from the heart of the cavern; and one of the monsters was breathing at their heels. They could see nothing, could be sure of nothing; but perforce

they must go on, not knowing if the next step would plunge them into some terrific pit or bottomless gulf. A sense of uncanny menace, of weird unhuman horror, increased upon them momently.

"This place is dark as the coal-cellars of Hades," jested Roverton. The others laughed bravely, though their nerves were on edge with sinister expectation and uncertainty.

The draft of dank, mephitic air grew stronger. The smell of stagnant, sunless waters, lying at some unfathomable depth, mingled in the men's nostrils with a nauseating reek as of bat-haunted catacombs or foul animal-dens.

"Phooey!" grumbled Deming. "This is worse than Gorgonzola and fox-guts all in one."

The floor of the cavern began to slope downward. Step by step the descent steepened like some infernal chute, till the mutineers could hardly keep their footing in the dark.

Remote and faint, like a little patch of phosphorescence, a light dawned in the depths below. The walls of the cavern, dolorously ribbed and arched, were now distinguishable. The light strengthened as the men went on; and soon it was all about them, pouring in pale-blue rays from an undiscerned subterranean source.

The incline ended abruptly, and they came out in a vast chamber full of the queer radiance, which appeared to emanate from roof and walls like some kind of radioactivity. They were on a broad semi-circular shelf; and, crossing the shelf, they found that it terminated sharply and fell sheer down for perhaps fifty feet to a great pool in the center of the chamber. There were ledges on the opposite side of the cavern at the same level as the one on which they stood; and there were smaller caves that ramified from these ledges. But apparently none of the caves was attainable from the ledge where the incline had ended. Between, were perpendicular walls that could afford no moment's foothold anywhere.

The three men stood on the brink above the pool and looked about them. They could hear the shuffling of the first lizard-monster on the incline and could see the baleful glaring of its single eye as it came forward.

"This looks like the last page of the last chapter." Roverton was now peering down at the pool. The others followed his gaze. The waters were dusky, stirless, dull, ungleaming, beneath the bluish glow from the

cavern-sides. They were like something that had been asleep or dead for thousands of years; and the stench that arose from them suggested ages of slow putrefaction.

"Good Lord!" what is that?" Roverton had noticed a change in the waters, an odd glimmer that came from beneath their surface as if a drowned moon were rising within them. Then the dead calm of the pool was broken with a million spreading ripples, and a vast head, dripping with loathsome luminescence, upreared from the waters. The thing was seven or eight feet wide, it was hideously round and formless and seemed to consist mainly of gaping mouths and glaring eyes all strewn together in a mad chaos of malignity and horror. There were at least five mouths, each of them large enough to devour a man at one swallow. They were fangless, and elastically distensible. Scattered among them, the eyes burned like satanic embers.

One of the lizard-monsters had crawled forth on the shelf. Scores of the pygmies were crowding beside and behind it, and some of them now advanced till they were abreast of the men. They stared down at the fearsome thing in the pool and made uncouth gestures and genuflections with heads, hands and long prehensile trunks, as if they were invoking or worshipping it. Their shrill voices rose in a rhythmically wavering chant.

The men were almost stupified with horror. The creature in the gulf was beyond anything in earthly legend or nightmare. And the rites of the obeisance offered by the pygmies was unbelievably revolting.

"The thing is their god," Roverton cried. "Probably they are going to sacrifice us to it."

The ledge was not thronged with pygmies; and the lizard-monster had pushed forward till the three men had no more than standing room on the brink of the gulf, in a crescent-like arc formed by its body.

The ceremony performed by the pygmies came to an end, their genuflections and chantings ceased, and all turned their eyes in a simultaneous unwinking stare on the mutineers. The four who were mounted upon the lizard-creature gave vent in unison to a single word of command.

"Ptrahsai!" The monster opened its maw and pushed forward with its squat jowl. Its horrible teeth were like a moving porticullis. Its breath was like a fetid wind. There was no time for terror, and no chance to resist: the men tottered and slipped on the narrowing verge,

and toppled simultaneously into space. In his fall Roverton clutched automatically at the nearest of the pygmies, caught the creature by its trunk, and bore it along as he hurtled through the air. He and his companions plunged with a huge splash into the pool and sank far below the surface. With a concerted presence of mind they all came up as close to the cavern-wall as they could and began to look for possible foot-holds. Roverton had not lost his grip on the pygmy. The creature howled ferociously when its head came above the water, and tried to claw him with its long toenails.

The precipice was bare and sheer from the water's edge, with no visible break anywhere. The men swam desperately along it, searching for an aperture or a ledge. The thing of mouths and eyes had begun to move toward them, and they felt sick with terror and repulsion at the sight of its slow, phosphorescent gliding. There was a damnable deliberation, a dreadful leisureliness in its motion, as if it knew that there was no way in which its victims could evade the elastic yawning of those five abominable mouths. It approached, till the cavern-wall beside the swimmers grew brighter with the foul effulgence of its looming head. They could see beneath and behind the head the distorting glowing of a long, formless body submerged in the black abysses of the pool.

Roverton was nearest to the monster when it came abreast. Its malignant bulging eyes were all bent upon him and its foremost mouth opened more widely and slavered with an execrable slime. Now it loomed athwart him, and he could feel the unutterable corruption of its breath. He was driven against the cavern-wall; and, managing to steady himself for a moment, he pushed the pygmy toward the approaching mouth. The pygmy yelled and struggled in a frenzy of fear till the awful slobbering lips had closed upon it. The monster paused as if its appetite and curiosity were appeased for the nonce; and the three men took advantage of this to continue their exploration of the wall.

Suddenly they perceived a low aperture in the smooth cliff, into which the waters flowed with a gentle rippling. The aperture was narrow and its roof was not more than a foot above the surface. It might or might not afford an escape from the pool; but no other possible exit could be detected. Without hesitation Adams swam into the opening and the others followed him.

The water was still deep beneath them and they did not touch bottom

anywhere. The walls of the little cavern were luminous at first; but the luminosity soon ceased and left them in absolute darkness. As they swam onward, they could no longer judge the extent of the air-space above them. At no time, however, were they compelled to dive beneath the surface; and they soon found that the cave was now wide enough to permit their moving side by side. They perceived also that they were caught in the flow of an ever-strengthening current which carried them on with considerable velocity. Since there was no sign of pursuit from the monster in the pool, the men began to feel a faint quickening of hope. Of course the stream might carry them to the very bowels of this terrific transstellar world, or might plunge at any moment into some dreadful gulf; or the roof might close in and crush them down beneath the noisome strangling waters. But at any rate they felt that there was a chance of ultimate emergence; and anything almost would be better than the proximity of the luminescent monster with mephitic breath and myriad eyes and mouths. Probably the cave in which they now swam was far too narrow to permit the entrance of its loathly bulk.

How long the three men floated in the swiftening current, it was impossible for them to know. As far as they could tell, there was no change in their situation; nor could they estimate how far they had gone in this underground world. The darkness weighed upon them, seemingly no less opaque and heavy than the water itself and the cavern-walls. They resigned themselves to the obscure progression of the stream, saving their strength as much as possible for any future emergency that might arise.

At length, when it seemed that they were irretrievably lost in the solid abysmal murk, when their eyes had forgotten the very memory of sight, the darkness before them was pierced by a pinpoint of light. The light increased by slow, uncertain degrees, but for awhile they were doubtful as to its nature, not knowing whether they were approaching another vault of phosphorescence, or the actual outer daylight. However, they were thankful for its dim glimmering. The stream had become still swifter and rougher, with boulder-cloven rapids in which their descent was impetuous and dangerous. More than once the men were almost thrown against the dark and jagged masses that towered about them.

All at once the current slackened and the seething rapids died in a broad pool above which the arching of the lofty cavern-dome was now

discernible. The light poured in a stream of pale radiance across this pool, from what was evidently the cavern's mouth; and beyond the mouth a large sheet of sun-white water stretched away and was lost in the luminous distance.

All three men were suddenly conscious of a crushing, dragging fatigue—an overwhelming reaction from all the peril and hardship they had undergone. But the prospect of emergence from this underworld of mysterious horror prompted them to summon their remaining strength; with sodden limbs, they swam toward the cavern-mouth and floated through its black arch into the silvery dazzle of a great lake.

The lake was probably the same body of water they had seen from afar on the previous day. Its aspect was ineffably weird and desolate. High cliffs with many buttresses and chimneys overhung the cavern from which they had emerged, and ran away on either side in gradually descending lines till they ceased in long flats of oooze and sand. There was no trace of vegetation anywhere—nothing but the wart stone of the cliffs, and the gray mud of the marshes, and the wan, dead waters. And at first the men thought that there was no life of any kind.

They swam along the cliff, looking for a place to land. The levels of ooze and sand were seemingly miles away; and their progress in the sluggish lake was excruciatingly slow and tedious. They felt as if the strange, lifeless waters had soaked them to the bone; and a deadly inertia dragged them down and drugged their very senses till everything became blurred in a monotone of faintness. They were all too exhausted to speak or even think. Dimly, despairingly, they plowed on toward the receding goal of the far-off shore.

Somehow, they were aware that a shadow had fallen upon them, breaking the diffused glare of the foggy sun. They were too weary to look up, or even speculate as to the origin of the shadow. Then they heard a harsh, jarring cry and a beating as of stiff, enormous wings, and something swooped down and hovered above them.

Turning their heads in the water, the three men saw an incredible sight. The thing that shadowed them was a mammoth bird-like creature with ribbed and leathern wings that were at least fifty feet from tip to tip. It suggested that prehistoric flying monster, the pterodactyl; and also it suggested a pelican, for beneath its seven-food beak there hung a prodigious pouch.

Scarcely crediting their eyes, the swimmers stared at the hovering ap-

parition. It glowered upon them with malevolent orbs of fire big as dinner-plates; and then, with horrible swiftness, it descended. Adams, who was nearest, felt the huge beak close upon him and lift him from the water; and before he could realize what was happening he found himself in the interior of the pouch. Deming was seized and deposited beside him a moment later; and Roverton, who had instinctively dived beneath the surface, was retrieved and drawn out by the questing beak as if he had been a flounder, and joined the other two.

Utterly stunned, they groped about in the noisome darkness of the pouch and were thrown prostrate in a heap as they felt the monster rise and soar heavenward. There were eel-like things that squirmed beneath them; and they breathed a medley of suffocating stenches. They could see nothing; but the gloom in which they lay was not absolute blackness, for the walls of the pouch were sufficiently permeable by light to create a blood-like dusk. The men could hear the loud beating of the leathern wings, could feel the rhythmic throb of their vibration; and while they were trying to habituate themselves to the unique situation, they had the sense of being borne onward in vertiginous flight at a great altitude.

Roverton was the first to speak.

"Of all the ineffable predicaments! Even a fiction-writer wouldn't dare to imagine this. I suppose the creature has a nest somewhere and is carrying us home to provide food for its young or its mate."

"Or," suggested Adams, "having caught a supply of live meat, it's going off somewhere to secure its vitamins."

A faint laughter greeted the jest.

"Well," put in Deming, "we're getting a free ride, anyhow—for once we're not having to walk, run or swim."

Time passed in a doubtful, confused way. The beating of the wings had died to a swish of rushing air as about the unflapping level of flight of some giant vulture or bird of prey. Still there was the sense of prodigious speed, of horizon on horizon left behind, of plains and waters and mountains slipping away beneath in a swift recession.

The men grew sick and dizzy with the noxious air of their prison, they fell into periods of semi-consciousness from which they revived with a start. In the novel horror of their position, they almost lost the feeling of identity. It was as if they were part of some monstrous dream or hallucination.

After an undetermined lapse of time, they felt a slackening of the headlong flight and then heard once more the thunderous flap of those huge wings as the bird sank groundward. It seemed to descend from an alp-surpassing height, with tremendous velocity.

Now the descent was arrested with abrupt ease, like the stopping of an elevator. A sudden glimmering of light in the interior of the pouch, and Roverton and his companions were aware that the creature had opened its bill as if to seize something. Then, with a raucous, deafening cry, it began to thresh about as in some stupendous convulsion, and the men were thrown violently from side to side in the tossing pouch. It was impossible to imagine what had happened—the whole occurrence was supremely mysterious and terrifying. Adams and Deming were knocked almost senseless by the shaking they received; and Roverton alone was able to retain anything like full cognizance. He realized that the bird was engaged in some sort of struggle or combat. After a brief interval its heavings became less tumultuous and powerful; and at last, with one hoarse, diabolic shriek, it appeared to collapse and lay still except for an occasional shuddering that shook body and neck and was communicated to the pouch. These shudderings diminished in force and frequency. The bird was now lying on its side, and the light entered the pouch directly through its wide-open beak.

Making sure that his companions had recovered their senses, Roverton crawled toward the light. The others followed in turn. Wriggling out through the slimy mouth, from which a frothy blood-like fluid was dripping, Roverton stood up dizzily and looked around.

The scene upon which he had emerged was wilder and madder than the grotesqueries of fever-delirium. For an instant he thought that the things about him were products of hallucination, were born of his overwrought nerves and brain. The flying monster was stretched on the ground and was wrapped from head to tail in the coils of something which Roverton could only designate to himself as a vegetable anaconda. The coils were pale-green with irregular brown and purplish mottlings and were manifestly hundreds of feet in length. They terminated in three heads covered with mouths like the suckers of an octopus. The coils had encircled the bird many times, and were evidently possessed of enormous constrictive power, for they had tightened upon their prey so that the body bulged between them in loathsome knots and protuberances. They were visibly rooted in a black, viscid-looking soil,

and were swollen at their base like the bole of some ancient tree. The three heads had applied themselves to the back of their prostrate victim and were obviously drawing sustenance from it with their myriad suckers.

All around, in the veering vapors that rose from the ground like steam, there loomed the tossing tops and writhing trunks, branches and feelers of a medley of half-ophidian or half-animal plant-forms. They varied in size from vines that were no larger than coral snakes, to amorphous bulks with a hundred squirming tentacles, huge as the kraken of mythology. They were no less diverse than the plant-forms of a terrestrial jungle, and all of them were hideously alive. Many were devoid of anything that suggested leaves; but others had fingerlike fronds or a sort of foliage that resembled a network of hairy ropes, and which undoubtedly served the same purpose as a spider web, for in some of these nets queer, uncouth insects and birds had been caught. Others of the trees bore tumescent oval or globular fruits, and fleshy-looking flowers that could close like mouths upon their prey. Overhead, through the steaming vapors, a hot, swollen sun flamed down from an almost vertical altitude. Roverton realized that the bird-monster, flying at many hundreds of miles an hour, must have carried himself and his companions to a sub-tropic zone of the world in which they were marooned.

Adams and Deming had now crawled out and were standing beside Roverton. For once none of the three could utter a word, in the profound stupefaction with which they surveyed their surroundings. Instinctively they all looked for an avenue of escape in the rows of vegetable monstrosities that hemmed them in on all sides. But there was no break anywhere—only a writhing infinity of things that were plainly poisonous, maleficent and inimical. And somehow they all felt that these plant-entities were conscious of their presence, were observing them closely, and, in some manner not cognizable by human senses, were even discussing or debating them.

Adams ventured to take a step forward. Instantly a long tentacle shot out from the nearest of the kraken-like forms and encircled him. Struggling and screaming, he was drawn toward the great dark lumpish mass from which the tentacles emanated. There was an open cuplike mouth of vermilion, fully a yard wide, in the center of this mass; and before his companions could even move, Adams was thrust into the mouth, which forthwith closed upon him like the mouth of a tightened sack.

Roverton and Deming were petrified with horror. Before they could even think of stirring from where they stood, two more of the tentacles shot out and gripped each of them about the waist. The grip was firm as an iron rope; and both were conscious of a sort of electric shock at the contact—a shock which served to stun them still further. Almost fainting, they were held erect by the horrible coils.

Nothing more happened for a brief interval. The incomprehensible strangeness of their position, the manifold fatigues and ordeals of the day, together with the shock of those coils, had dazed the two men so that they could hardly grasp the fate of their companion and their own imminent doom.

Everything became unreal, mistly, dream-like. Then, through the vagueness that enveloped their senses, they saw that the dark mass at the core of the tentacles was beginning to move and heave. Soon the heavings turned to convulsions that became more and more violent. Roverton and Deming fell to the ground as the coils loosened their hold, and saw the lashing of a score of tentacles in the air above, tossing from side to side about the agitated central mass. Then, from this mass, the body of Adams was ejected, to fall beside Roverton and Deming. Obviously human flesh had not agreed with the digestion of the Andromedan plant-monster. The mass continued to heave and palpitate, and its myriad arms waved through the air as if in agony.

The two men dared not look at the body of their erstwhile comrade. Sick, and utterly spent with weariness and horror, they lay prostrate on the ground. After awhile they felt the tentacles encircle them once more; but they were not drawn toward the central mouth but were lifted and dragged away toward the tangle of unearthly forms behind the vegetable kraken. Here they were caught by the supple serpentine limbs of other living plants and were drawn onward through the jungle.

They were dimly aware of multiform mouths that gaped or puckered in the air beside them, they felt the antennae-like tendrils that swayed and groped, they saw the poising branches armed with dart-like thorns, they saw the crimson ell-wide blossoms with cloven tongues from which a venomous honey dripped. And all around they heard the moan or shriek or hiss of animals snared by the demoniacal growths, and saw the yawning mouths that devoured their victims bodily, or the suckers that fastened upon them like the lips of vampires. But among these terrors

and horrors of a transstellar flora the two men passed unharmed, untouched, and were drawn from coil to lethal coil, from net to fatal net, through the unimaginable woods. It was as if all these carnivorous and deadly things had been warned of their inedible nature, and were thrusting them away.

At length the light grew stronger and the men perceived that they were approaching the jungle's edge. The last of the plant-krakens gave them a vehement fling with its great arms, and the steaming soil of a flat, treeless plain hovered and reeled before them as they fell unconscious in the open sunlight.

Roverton was the first to recover his senses. Feeling very weak and dizzy, with blurred thoughts and vision, he tried to sit up, and fell back helplessly. Then as his eyes and brain began to clear, a little strength returned to him, and a second effort was more successful. His first thought was of his comrade, for whom he now looked. Deming still lay where he had fallen, in a prone and sprawling posture.

Several hours must have elapsed, for the sun was now hanging above the edge of the plain, and the tall, columnar vapors were tinted as with the flames of an aurora. The very soil itself, wet and glistening, had taken on a reflection of prismatic hues. Turning, Roverton saw behind him at a little distance the fearsome jungle from which he and Deming had been so summarily ejected by the scarcophagous trees and plants. The jungle was comparatively quiescent now; but its branches and boles were still swaying slightly; and a low, sibilant sound arose from among them like the hissing of an army of serpents.

Roverton managed to stand up. He tottered like a fever-patient, and could scarcely keep from falling. His mouth was parched and fiery with an all-consuming thirst; and his head throbbed like a beaten drum. Seeing a pool of water not far away, he started toward it, but was forced to finish his journey on hands and knees. He drank, and felt amazingly refreshed by the dark, bitterish fluid. Filling his cap (which he had somehow managed to retain through all the viscissitudes of the past two days) with the water, he went back to his companion, walking erect this time, and sprinkled some of the fluid on Deming's face. Deming stirred, and opened his eyes. In a brief while he was able to drink the remainder of the contents of the cap, and then succeeded in standing up and taking a few steps.

"Well, what's the next number on the program?" he queried. His voice was cracked and feeble, but indomitably gallant.

"Damned if I know," shrugged Roverton. "But I move that we get as far as possible from that beastly jungle." Neither he nor Deming could bear to think of Adams' fate or the abominable things they had seen and heard and felt. The whole experience was unendurable to human nerves, and revulsion sickened the two men as the memory of it arose on the threshold of their brains. Resolutely they turned their backs to the carnivorous forest, and staggered away toward the dim and fuming horizon with its banners of rainbow splendor.

The landscape through which they now wandered was like the bottom of a newly dried ocean. It was one vast level of reeking clay, of a peculiar consistency, which yielded a little like rubber or some resilient fabric beneath their feet, without breaking through. The sensation afforded by treading upon it was uncanny and disconcerting. At every step they fully expected to sink down in some bog or quicksand. They realized why they had not suffered any contusions or broken bones when the living trees had hurled them forth with such irrestible violence.

There were many pools of water in the plain; and once the men were compelled to deviate from their course by a narrow, winding lake. The aspect of the resilient ooze was indepictably monotonous and was unrelieved by any vegetable growth or outcropping of mineral. But somehow it was not dead, but conveyed a sense of somnolent vitality, as if it possessed a dark, secret life of its own.

The vapors parted in the oblique rays of the sun. Not far ahead, Roverton and Deming now perceived a low table-like elevation. Even at first sight, it suggested an island; and as the men neared it the characteristics it revealed were indicative that it really had been such, and that the plain around it had been the bed of a shallow sea at no very ancient date. There were wave-marks in the soil about the base; and, in contradistinction to the utter barrenness of the plain, there were boulders and tree-forms on its long undulating sides; and several ruinous walls and monoliths of an unearthly architecture were visible on the broad, flat summit.

"Now for some Andromedan archaeology," Roverton commented, pointing to the ruins.

"Not to mention some more botany," added Deming.

Both of them peered with considerable caution and trepidation at the foremost trees and plants. These were similar in type to the monstrosities of the jungle; but they were more sparse and scattered; and somehow there was a difference. When Deming and Roverton approached them the nature of the difference became manifest. The ophidian branches dropped and trailed on the ground, and were strangely still and unmoving. Seen closer at hand, they were withered and mummified. It was evident to these scientists that the trees had long been dead.

Not without repulsion, Roverton broke off the end of one of the hanging tentacles. It snapped easily; and he found that he could crumble it into fine powder between his fingers. Realizing that there was nothing to be feared, he and Deming began to climb the slope toward the fantastic ruins.

The soil of the hill, a sort of grey and purple marl, was firm beneath their feet. They reached the summit as the sinking sun began to disappear behind a far-off line of cliffs that rose like the core of a continent from the plain.

Circled about with rows of the dead plant-monsters, there stood in the center of the summit the strange ruins that Roverton and Deming had descried from below. They gleamed in the light with a dull luster, and appeared to be made of some foreign stone that was heavily impregnated with metal. They were apparently the remnants of several immense buildings, and bore the marks of some awful cataclysm that had carried away their super-structures and even much of the floor-work and foundations. One of the walls retained a doorway that was oddly high and narrow and was wider at top than at bottom. Also, there were some queer windows close to the ground. The men wondered at the physical characteristics of the race that had reared such edifices. From a human standpoint everything about the ruins was architecturally abnormal.

Roverton approached one of the monoliths. It was square in shape, was forty feet high by seven in diameter, and had manifestly been taller at one time, for the top was riven and jagged where it had been broken off abruptly. It was wrought of the same material as the walls. A series of bas-reliefs, intermingled with columns of hieroglyphic letter-forms, had been carved about the base. The bas-reliefs depicted beings of a curious type, with long thin trunks terminating at each end in a multitude of many-jointed limbs. The heads of these creatures, or what appeared

to be such, were at the nether extremity of the trunks, and had two mouths that were set above a double row of eyes. Ear-like appendages drooped from the chins. The lower limbs ended in bird-like claws and the upper in broad, umbrella-shaped webs whose use was beyond conjecture. Roverton exclaimed with amazement as he called Deming's attention to these figures. Whether such beings represented an extinct race, or whether their prototypes were still to be found in this outré world, was of course an irresolvable problem. But the men felt that this mystery too would soon be solved. It would be solved whether they liked it or not.

The men were too worn out with their herculean ordeals to devote much time and energy to speculation of this order. They found a sheltered place in the angle of one of the walls, and sat down. Perforce they had eaten nothing since the food provided by the pygmies at early dawn; and seemingly there was no immediate prospect of finding any. They were desperate and there seemed no hope to lighten the depression that closed in about these doomed men.

The sun had gone down, leaving an erubescent twilight that stained the soil, the ruins and the dead trees as with a deepening tide of blood. A preternatural silence prevailed—a silence fraught with the sense of foreign mystery, the burden of ultramundane antiquity that clung to those strange ruins. The men lay down and began to doze.

They awoke simultaneously, without knowing for a brief moment what it was that had aroused them. The twilight had turned to a rich violet, though the walls and trees were still clearly distinguishable. Somewhere in this twilight, there was a shrill, strident humming that grew louder momentarily.

All at once the humming was near at hand, in midair. It soared to a deafening clamor. Roverton and Deming saw that a swarm of giant insects with curving five-inch bills were hovering about them as if uncertain whether or not to attack. There seemed to be hundreds of these formidable-looking creatures. One of them, bolder than the others, darted forward and stung Deming on the back of his left hand till its beak almost protruded from his palm. He cried out with the pain, and struck the insect with his other fist. It squashed beneath the blow and fell to the ground, emitting a nauseous stench.

Roverton sprang to his feet and broke off a bough from one of the

trees. This he waved at the swarm, which retreated a little but did not disperse. An idea came to him, and he thrust the bough into Deming's hand, saying:

"If you can keep them off, I'll try to build a fire."

While Deming waved his ineffectual weapon at the hesitating army, Roverton broke off more of the dead, tentacle-like boughs, piled them, and crushed others into a heap of fine dust with his heel. Then, in the twilight, he found two small fragments of the metallic stone from which the buildings had been wrought; and striking the fragments together, he obtained a spark which fell into the dust-pile and ignited it. The stuff was highly combustible, for in less than a minute the heap of boughs was burning brightly. Terrified by the blaze, the insects fell back; and their stridulation soon diminished and sank away in the distance.

Deming's hand was now painfully swollen and throbbing from the sting he had received.

"Those brutes would have finished us if they had been nervy enough to attack in force," he observed.

Roverton piled more fuel on the fire, in case the swarm should return.

"What a world!" he ejaculated. "I wish Volmer were here, confound him!"

As he spoke, there was a far-off droning in the crepuscular sky. For a moment, the men thought that the sinsect swarm was coming back to assail them again. Then the droning deepened to a great roar. The roar was somehow familiar, though neither could determine at first the memory which it tended to evoke. Then, where stars were beginning to pierce the vague heavens, they saw the indistinct bulk that descended toward them.

"My God! Is that the space-flier?" cried Deming.

With a final roaring and screeching of its propellers, the bulk came to rest within fifty feet of the fire. The light flickered on its metal sides and revealed the well-known ladder down which the three mutineers had climbed in an alien darkness.

A figure descended the ladder and came toward the fire. It was Captain Volmar. His face was drawn and livid in the firelight, and looked older than the two men remembered it. He greeted them stiffly, with an odd trace of embarrassment in his manner.

"I'm certainly glad to have located you," he announced, without waiting for Roverton or Deming to return too his salutation. "I've been flying around this damn planet all day, hoping there was one chance in a trillion of finding you again. I didn't take any bearings when I put you off in the night, so of course I had no idea where to look. I was about to give it up, when I saw the fire and decided to investigate.

"If you'll come back with me," he continued, "we'll let bygones be bygones. I'm short-handed now, and am going to give up the trip and start back for the solar system. We began to develop engine-trouble not long after we put you off; and two of the men were electrocuted by a short-circuit before the trouble was remedied. Their bodies are floating somewhere in mid-ether now—I gave them a space-burial. Then Jasper fell ill, and I've been running the flier single-handed for the past twenty-four hours. I'm sorry I was so hasty with you—I certainly put you off on an impossible sort of world. I've been all over it today, and there's nothing anywhere but seas, deserts, marshes, mud-flats, jungles of crazy-looking vegetation, a lot of equally desolate ruins, and no life except overgrown insects, reptiles, and a few cliff-dwelling pygmies in the subpolar regions. It's a wonder that even two of you have managed to survive. Come on—you can tell me your story when we're aboard the flier."

Roverton and Deming followed him as he turned and re-ascended the ladder. The man-hole closed behind them with a clang that was more grateful to their ears than music. A minute more, and the flier was climbing the heavens along the crepuscular curve of the planet, till it soared into the daylight of Delta Andromedae. Then it rushed on through the sidereal gulfs, till the great sun became a star and began to resume its wonted place in an ever-receding constellation.

THE AMAZING PLANET

"THIS world," said Volmar, "plainly is of Mercurian type. One side is always presented to the sun; the other confronts eternal night; though it may be that there is a very slow and incomplete diurnal rotation. One hemisphere, as we have seen, is a blazing desert, and the other is sheeted with ice and frozen snow, except for the twilight zone in which we have landed."

After eight unbroken months of ether-voyaging, in their attempted circuit of the universe, Captain Volmar and his men had felt the need of stretching their legs again on some sort of Terra Firma. The cramped quarters of the ether-ship *Alcyone,* the monotony of a never-ceasing flight through spatial emptiness and darkness, with only far-strewn suns and systems and nebulae for mile-posts, had palled on everyone, even the ascetically ardent Volmar. A brief respite on some planetary body was deemed advisable. They had made a number of such pauses during their half-decade of journeying.

They were nearing a lesser, unnamed sun in Serpens when this decision was made. Of course, the sun might not possess a planetary system. However, as they drew closer, the *Alcyone's* telescopic reflectors revealed four planets that were circling it in wide-flung orbits. It so happened that in the position which it then occupied, the innermost world was nearer to the space-ship than the others; and it soon attracted the curiosity of the voyagers by its odd markings.

Between the deserts of the sunlit hemisphere and the ice-fields and mountains that glimmered palely on the nightward side beneath two diminutive moons, a dark, narrow zone suggesting vegetation was visible —a zone that encircled the planet from pole to pole. Clouds and vapors

above this penumbral belt had proved the presence of an atmosphere. A landing had been made; and Captain Volmar, Jasper the mate, Roverton, and the other members of the crew, had emerged cautiously from the flier's man-hole after determining the temperature and chemical constituents of the outside air.

The temperature was moderate—about 60°. But the existence of one or two unknown, uncertain gases in the air had denoted the advisability of wearing masks and carrying oxygen-tanks. Equipped with these, and armed with automatics, the party sallied forth into a strange landscape.

The *Alcyone* had descended on a low, level, open hill-top. The ground resembled a coarse turf, and was pale-blue in color. When the men trod upon it for the first time, they found that it was not covered with anytthing in the least related to grass, but with a peculiar growth, two or three inches high, like a thin, branching fungus. It was not rooted in the soil; and it fell over or crumbled readily beneath the footsteps of the explorers.

They could see plainly enough in the weird twilight, strengthened as it was by the glimmering of the two moons, one of which was crescent and the other gibbous. Far-off, a row of moundlike hills, interspersed with sharp dolomites, was outlined on an afterglow of torrid saffron that soared in deepending rays to assail the green heavens. A few stars, and the other planets of the system, were visible.

Volmar and his men approached the edge of the hill-top. Below them, a long, undulant slope descended to a plain covered with the dark vegetation which they had descried from afar in space.

It was a mass of purples and blues and mauves, ranging from the palest to the darkest tints, and it seemed to vary in height from shrublike growths to things that presented the size, if not the natural aspect, of full-grown forest trees. Some of the smaller forms, like an advance guard, had climbed mid-way on the acclivity. They were very heavy at the base, with dwindling boles like inverted carrots and many nodular branchings of an irregularity more grotesque than that of any terrane cacti. The lower branches appeared to touch the ground, with the ungainly sprawl of crab or tarantula legs.

"I'd like to have a look at those things," said Volmar. "Do you want to come with me, Roverton? The rest of you fellows had best remain within sight of the flier. We haven't seen any sort of animate life yet; but there's no telling what might be lurking in the neighborhood."

He and Roverton went down the slope, with the fungoid turf crunch-

ing beneath their feet. They neared the foremost plant-forms rather cautiously, remembering their unpleasant experiences with flesh-eating trees and vegetables in other worlds. These forms, however, though they were extremely uncouth and even ugly, displayed none of the usual characteristics of carnivorous plants.

"What are they?" Volmar was frankly puzzled. "Cacti? Fungi? Aerophytes? I don't believe they have any root-systems at all—they look as if one could knock them over very easily."

He approached one of the short, heavy boles, and pushed it with his foot. It fell to the ground and lay sprawling with its thick, ungainly limbs in the air. Unlike the tiny growths under-foot, it was very tough and rubbery, and none of its branches were broken or in any wise injured by the fall. On the contrary, they had bent with elastic ease where they were caught underneath the bole.

"The thing must be an air-plant," said Volmar. "I don't see any sign of root-attachments."

He was turning away, when Roverton touched his arm.

"What do you think of that, Captain?"

The overthrown plant was moving, albeit with great slowness and sluggishness, in a manifest effort to right itself. The top heaved, the branches that were doubled beneath it seemed to straighten and lengthen, while those beneath the base contracted. The thing was plainly trying to secure a sort of leverage. At last, after several vain attempts, it resumed an upright position, on the very same spot from which Volmar had displaced it.

"That's interesting," Volmar commented. "These things have the power of mobility when such is needed. I wouldn't be surprised if all this vegetation were migratory. Doubtless it has developed the ability to move from place to place on account of the severely changing climatic conditions. In all likelihood the habitable twilight zone shifts more or less during the planet's annual rotation, and these plants follow it, to avoid the extreme heat of full daylight or the utter cold of darkness. If there is any animal life, it is probably nomadic also."

"Shall we go on?" asked Roverton. "That forest at the bottom of the hill should be worthy of study."

"Alright," assented Volmar. "But we mustn't wander too far from the others. There's no use taking chances in an unexplored world—we've done that before and have gotten into some tight places."

A hundred yards, and they were among the outposts of the strange forest. Many of the growths resembled the first shrubs in type, though

they were heavier and taller. Others grew in recumbent positions, like vast vegetable centipedes or many-legged monsters. Some retracted their outer limbs in a sluggish caution before the approach of the men; but most of them did not appear to move at all. There seemed to be nothing to fear from these plants; so Volmar and Roverton went on among the irregularly scattered groups, examining them with much curiosity. So far, they had seen no evidence whatever of animal or insect life.

In their scientific absorption, the explorers did not realize how far they had wandered, till they saw that the plants around them were becoming higher and thicker. Many of them were twenty or thirty feet tall; and they stood so close that further progress among them was difficult.

"I guess we'd better turn back," said Volmar.

They started to retrace their steps, which were plainly marked in the trodden fungi. To their surprise, when they had gone only a little distance, they found that the path was now blocked in many places by thickets of the strange trees, which must have closed in stealthily behind their passing, though no movement of this sort had been discernible at the time. Perhaps these plants had been impelled to follow them by some obscure instinct or stirring of curiosity. But evidently they were not aggressive or dangerous; and their motor activity was the most torpid kind.

Because of this re-arrangement of the growths, however, the men were compelled to divagate from their direct route as they returned toward the *Alcyone*. But they did not anticipate any real difficulty, and were not likely to go astray, since the low hill from which they had descended was visible in many places above the tops of the vegetation.

Presently they came to some old footmarks, characterized by three toes of preternatural length and sharpness. The prints were very far apart, suggesting that their originator was possessed of phenomenally long legs.

Volmar and Roverton followed the tracks, insomuch as these appeared to be going in the general direction of the space-flier. But a little further on, in the lee of a dense clump of vegetation, the tracks entered a huge burrow, into which the men could almost have walked without stooping, on a gentle incline. Both eyed it rather warily as they passed; but there was no visible sign of its occupant.

"I'm not sure that I'd care to meet that customer, whatever it is," observed Roverton. "Probably it's some loathsome overgrown insect."

They had gone perhaps seventy feet beyond the burrow's entrance,

when the ground suddenly caved in beneath Volmar, who was in the lead, and he disappeared from Roverton's sight. Hastening to the edge of the hole into which his companion had fallen, Roverton met a similar fate, for the ground crumbled beneath him and he was precipitated into a dark pit seven or eight feet deep, landing beside Volmar. Both were a little bruised by the fall but were otherwise unhurt. They had broken through into the burrow, whose entrance they could now see from where they were lying. The place was filled with a noisome, mephitic smell, and was damp with disagreeable oozings. Picking themselves up, the men started toward the entrance at once, hoping that the burrow's owner had not been aroused by their involuntary intrusion.

As they approached the mouth, they were startled by a medley of shrill, piping sounds which arose from without—the first sounds they had heard in this fantastic world. As they drew still nearer, they saw the silhouettes of two figures that were standing just outside the cave. The figures were bipedal, with thick legs of disproportionate shortness, and arms that reached almost to the ground. The heads could not be seen from within the tunnel. These extraordinary beings were stretching a narrow, heavy-stranded net, weighted at the ends with balls of metal or mineral, which they held between them across the entrance. They continued their piping noise; and their voices grew shriller still and took on an odd, cajoling note.

Volmar and Roverton had paused.

"Now what?" whispered Roverton.

"I think," Volmar whispered in reply, "that those creatures, whoever or whatever they are, must be waiting for the owner of the burrow to come out. They have tracked it, or perhaps have even driven it here. Probably they're planning to wind that net around its long legs when it emerges."

"Or," suggested Roverton, "maybe they saw us fall into the pit and are planning to take us captive."

They returned cautiously toward the caved-in portion of the burrow, and stopped when they saw that several more of the weird hunters, some of them equipped with nets and others with trident-headed lances, were grouped around the opening above and were peering down.

The heads of these beings were even more peculiar than their limbs, and were quite hideous from a human standpoint. They possessed three eyes, two of which were set obliquely in close juxtaposition to a slit-like mouth surrounded with waving or drooping tentacles, and the other

near the top of a long, sloping brow that was lined with sparse bristles. There were rudimentary projections from each jowl, that might have been either ears or wattles; but nothing even remotely suggestive of nostrils was detectible. The whole expression was supremely wild and ferocious.

"Can't say that I admire the looks of those customers," murmured Roverton. "Plainly they're a hunting-party; and we, or the occupant of this burrow—or both—have been marked out as their meat."

The guards at the entrance had continued their piping song. Suddenly it seemed to find a far-off echo in the depths of the cavern. The sound approached and grew louder and shriller. Volmar and Roverton could see the gleaming of two greenish, phosphorescent eyes in the darkness beyond the circle of dim light that fell from the caved-in roof.

"The hunters are luring that beast," said Volmar, "by imitating the voices of its own kind."

He and Roverton, with their automatics ready, now retreated slowly toward the entrance, watching over their shoulders as they went to the phosphoric eyes that continued to advance from the gloom.

Now they could see two enormous, spraddling, many-jointed legs, and a squat, shaggy face and globe-like body; and then the two hind-legs, as the creature came into the light. Somehow, it was more like an insect than an animal—like some Gargantuan, over-nourished arachnid. As the monster passed beneath the opening, the two men saw the flash of a spear cast by one of the watchers above. It sank into the dark, hairy body, and the piping rose to a harsh scream, as the creature leapt forward upon Volmar and Roverton.

With their automatics flaming and crackling in the gloom, the men turned and ran toward the entrance. Their maddened pursuer, seemingly undeterred by the bullets, was close upon their heels.

The weighted net was still stretched across the burrow's mouth, and Volmar and Roverton now fired their last cartridges at the legs of the two beings who held it. Both of these creatures fell sprawling and dropped the net. The men burst forth into the light, only to find themselves confronted by a dozen similar beings, all armed with nets or spears. These bizarre hunters gave no evidence of fear or surprise at the appearance of the earthlings, but proceeded with calm, methodical swiftness to form in a ring.

The men rushed upon them, hoping to break through, but with ineludable speed and deftness each was entangled in the heavy meshes cast

about him, and went to the ground with pinioned arms and legs. Their automatics had fallen from their fingers and were beyond reach. Lying helpless, they saw the emerging of the monster that had driven them from the burrow. It was neatly trapped in its turn by the guards; and it lay palpitating on the ground, bleeding a thick bliush fluid from the spear and bullet wounds it had received.

The two men could scarcely move, so closely were the weighted meshes wound about them.

"This is a pretty tight situation," remarked Roverton, whose wit was unquenchable by any hardship or danger, no matter how desperate.

"Yes, and it may be tighter before we are through," added Volmar grimly, as he lay staring up into the strange faces of their captors, who had gathered in a circle about the earth-men and were surveying them with manifest curiosity.

Seen close at hand, these beings were truly hideous and repulsive, though it was likely that they prepresented an evolutionary type similar in mental endowment to aboriginal man. They were of gigantic stature, averaging seven or eight feet. Their naked, dark-grey bodies were covered with a hairless skin marked off into rudimentary scales or plates, possibly denotive of some reptilian origin or affinity.

Their three eyes, their sloping brows and tentacle-fringed mouths gave them an indescribably weird appearance. Their long arms were triple-jointed, in opposition to the squat, single-jointed legs, which ended in webbed feet. Their fingers were seemingly boneless, but extremely powerful and supple, and were wrapped like tentacles about the terrific trident spears which they carried. The heads and shafts of these weapons were both made of the same copper-colored metal.

The hunters began to gibber among themselves, in guttural growling voices that were evidently their natural tones, and were quite unlike the shrill pipings with which they had lured the monster from its burrow. Their speech seemed to consist of monosyllabic sounds whose exact phonetic nature would have defied human imitation or classification.

After what was plainly a sort of debate two of the giants stepped forward and proceeded to unbind the legs of the earth-men, leaving their arms tied by the knotted nets, and prodded them roughly with spear-butts to make them stand up.

Volmar and Roverton scarcely needed this urging. They rose awkwardly and stiffly. Then, bearing them along in its midst, the whole

party started off through the woods in an opposite direction from the hill on which the flier had landed. Some of the hunters had tied the trussed monster to a sort of light metal frame with handles and were carrying it among them. The two who had been wounded by the earthmen limped along in the rear. Short-legged as they were, these beings made rapid progress, and Volmar and Roverton were soon compelled to quicken their pace.

"Now whither?" asked Roverton. "I suppose you and I are going into the tribal pot along with that monster."

Volmar did not answer. He was examining the net by which his arms were bound. It was made of a finely linked metal, like highly tempered copper, and was very strong. The workmanship was so delicate and regular as to arouse wonderment. Also, the spears carried by the giants were exquisitely wrought.

"I wonder," soliloquised Volmar, "if these nets and weapons were made by their owners?"

"Probably," said Roverton. "Of course, the work seems to betoken a considerable degree of manual skill and civilization; and these beings are a pretty low and bestial-looking lot from a human esthetic viewpoint. But after all we can't tell much about them from their appearance. All the extraplanetary peoples we have met were more or less monstrous according to our standards."

"That's true," assented Volmar slowly. "But somehow I have a hunch that our captors aren't the only beings on this world."

"Maybe; but I'm not very curious to know. I hope Jasper and the others will follow our trail—they must be worrying about us by now. A little rescue party would certainly be welcome."

"We may have to rescue ourselves—it all depends on what we get into. Our captors are doubtless nomads who roam from place to place in the twilight zone, like the vegetation. There's no telling what sort of abodes they have—if any. It is possible that they may dwell underground."

"I've had enough burrows for one day!" ejaculated Roverton. "Also, I'm not likely to forget the experience that Deming, Adams and myself had with those troglodyte pygmies in Andromeda."

Several miles were traversed by the party. The way led deviously over a flat plain, amid clumps of the rootless vegetation. The row of mound-like hills and sharp dolomites which the men had seen from the

Alcyone's landing-place was now very near. The trees became sparser, and ended on the verge of a shallow, rock-strewn valley where thin streams of water ran tortuously down to a long, winding lake.

Crossing this valley, whose soil was covered by small fungi, and fording one of the streams, the party entered a deep gorge which wound slowly upward among the further hills. Here there were deep chasms, and crags of roughly splintered stone with outcroppings of unknown metal, and dark torrents that fumed with iridescent vapors. However, there was a well-marked path, and progress was not difficult.

Now the path began to slope downward. Soon the party emerged in an amphitheater surrounded by crags and pinnacles. Here an unexpected sight awaited the earth-men. To one side, in the lee of a cliff, were a number of rude stone huts; and in the middle of the amphitheatre there reposed a huge, glittering object, perfectly oval in form, and plainly of an artificial nature.

"I'll wager," cried Roverton, "that that thing is some kind of air-vessel, or even space-craft."

"I never bet," rejoined Volmar. "But I shouldn't be surprised if you were right."

Many figures were moving about the oval object; and as the party drew nearer, it could be seen that they were not all of the same type or species. Many were like the hunters who had captured Volmar and Roverton; but others differed as widely from these as the hunters differed in their turn from the earth-men.

They were about four feet tall, with spindling limbs and delicate bodies, pinched in the center like those of ants, and heads of such disproportionate size as to give at once the impression of artificial masks. These creatures were gorgeously colored, with all the hues of the harlequin opal, and contrasted extremely with the dark giants.

Seen closer at hand, the oval object revealed a series of small ports filled with a vitreous, violet-hued material, and an open circular door in its side from which a stair-case of light aerial structure, doubtless collapsible, ran to the ground.

The two groups of unearthly beings were engaged in a lively conversation, and the gruff gutturals of the giants were surmounted by the sweet, piercing sibilants of the dwarfs. Several strange animals of varying size and monstrosity, bound with nets, were lying on the ground at one side; and some of the dwarfs were bringing copper-colored nets

and spears and other weapons or implements of more doubtful use from the interior of the oval vessel. When some of these articles were handed over to the giants, the earth-men surmised that they were being bartered in exchange for the trussed animals.

"What did I tell you?" cried Volmar. "I knew that those nets and tridents weren't made by our captors. And I doubt very much if the dwarfs are natives of this planet at all. I believe they have come from a neighboring world of this same solar system. Possibly they are zoologists, and are collecting specimens of the local fauna. I think those head-pieces of their are respirative masks—they don't seem to fit with the rest of their anatomy. No doubt they are unable to breathe the atmosphere of this world, at least in its pure state; and it is probable that those masks include some sort of filtering apparatus. There is nothing to be discerned in the nature of air-tanks."

Seeing the approach of the hunters with Volmar and Roverton in their midst, the two groups interrupted their bargaining and stared in silence at the new-comers. The heads, or masks, of the dwafs were fitted with two pairs of green eyes, set vertically and far apart; and their gaze was uncannily intent and wholly unchanging. The eyes were divided into many facets, like those of an insect, and blazed with emerald light.

Between and below the eyes there was a short, trumpet-like attachment, which doubtless served as a mouth-piece; and its hollow tube might well have contained the filtering apparatus surmised by Volmar. Two curving horns, perforated like flutes, arose from the sides of those curious heads, and suggested an auditory mechanism. The limbs and torsos of the dwarfs were seemingly nude, and glittered like the shards of bright-colored beetles, with nacreous lights that ran and melted into each other with every movement.

A brief interval of silence, as if all these beings were overcome with amazement at the appearance of Volmar and Roverton; and then the dwarfs began to talk and gesticulate excitedly among themselves, pointing at the earth-men with their thin, pipe-like arms, which ended in rather intricate-looking hands whose fingers were fine as antennae. Then they addressed the giant hunters in tones of interrogation, and a long discussion followed.

Some of the dwarfs approached Volmar and Roverton and examined their clothing, masks and oxygen-tanks with minute attention. The

tanks, which were built into the suits of flexible vitriolene, were apparently a source of special interest. There was much argument among the dwarfs in their sweet, hissing voices; and it was plain that some were maintaining one theory and some another. Their whole air was one of great puzzlement and perplexity.

"I'll bet," said Roverton, "that they think we're some new species of animal native to this world, and are trying to classify us."

"They have the look of investigative scientists," agreed Volmar. "And it must be giving them a lot of trouble to place us in their system of biology or zoology."

Now the dwarfs addressed themselves again to the hunters. There was much voluble expostulation on both sides.

"Guess they're trying to drive a bargain for us," conjectured Roverton. "And the hunters want full value in trade before they part with such rare specimens."

A little later, to confirm this surmise, the dwarfs brought out a pile of odd but exquisitely wrought implements, some of which were perhaps for culinary use, and several large bell-shaped receptacles of semi-vitreous earthenware filled with varicolored materials that resembled roughly-ground farinaceous food-stuffs.

These were laid before the hunters, who continued to demur and chaffer; and then some huge, abdominous bottles, made of an unidentifiable substance that was neither glass nor metal nor porcelain, were brought forth and added to the pile. Their contents were past the conjecture of the earth-men, but obviously they were prized by the giants and were considered as clinching the bargin.

The chaffering came to an end, and attention was turned to the wounded monster which the giants had captured with Volmar and Roverton. The dwarfs appeared to be rather dubious about purchasing this creature, and examined its wounds in a somewhat cursory manner. Their decision was plainly negative; for after a little while the captors of the earthmen, as well as the other group of giants, broke up and went away in the direction of the stone huts, bearing the various articles of barter and the dying animal as well as several other curious creatures which the dwarfs for one reason or another had declined to buy.

"Sold!" laughed Roverton, as he peered at the unique menangerie of which he and Volmar were seemingly a part. There were at least a dozen of these quaint monsters, who represented the fauna of the planet. Some were undreamable mixtures of serpentine, insect and mammalian forms, others were loathsome, enormous annalids, and others

still were not alliable with any known genus or combination of genera. Many were plainly ferocious, and were still struggling convulsively against their bonds. Anyone who came within reach of their dart-like talons or saw-like teeth would have fared badly.

"I wonder how the dwarfs are going to handle them?" questioned Volmar, as he eyed the contrast between these monsters, many of which were quite huge and bulky, and the frail iridescent beings.

As if in answer to his query, a tackle of strong metallic-looking ropes was lowered from the doors of the vessel. Then two dwarfs, armed with long rods of a dull bluish material terminating in circular disks covered with blunt prongs of some brighter substance, came forward from amid the group. Each applied the end of his rod to the spine of one of the struggling animals.

Instantly, with a single shudder, the monsters lay still, as if dead. Manifestly some paralyzing force was emitted by the rods. The lowered ropes were then fastened about the inert monsters by other dwarfs, and they were hauled up by a sort of mechanical windlass and disappeared within the oval vessel. Two more were treated in the same manner; and then the rod-bearers approached Volmar and Roverton. He and Volmar looked about at the dwarfs, who surrounded them in a circle. Many of these frail beings were armed with the strange rods or with other instruments of dubious nature. But with their attenuated arms and pinched bodies they did not seem very formidable.

"Let's make a break for it," said Volmar. He and Roverton leapt back from the advancing rod-bearers, and hurled themselves at the circle. The dwarfs gave way, avoiding them with agility; and one of them reached out with his rod and touched Volmar on the chest while another caught Roverton in the abdomen.

Neither was aware of any shock from the contact: the effect was more that of some narcotic or anaesthetic, pervading the entire body with instant numbness and insensibility. Darkness seemed to rush upon them from all sides, and both men became totally unconscious.

Emerging from the bournless midnight of oblivion, Roverton heard a deep thrumming sound which conveyed at once to his reviving brain the idea of some powerful mechanism. The sound was incessant and appeared to come from above. Roverton could feel its vibration in all the tissues of his body.

Opening his eyes, he received a series of visual impressions which for the moment were altogether confusing and were quite meaningless. There was a bright chaos of lights, of unearthly forms and angles,

which baffled his brain. Then his eyes began to establish a sort of order, and he realized that he was lying on the floor of an unfamiliar structure, made of transparent panes in a frame-work of massive metal bars. The structure was perhaps seven feet in height by nine in diameter, and was shaped like a huge box or cage.

Volmar, still unconscious, was lying beside him; and both Volmar and himself were no longer bound by the copperish nets. Between the bars he could see other structures of a similar type, in which the monsters trapped by the giant hunters and sold to the dwarfs were reposing.

Some of these creatures were beginning to recover from their paralysis, while others were still insensible and immobile. The cages were in a long room with curving walls and a low, arched ceiling. There were numerous ports in the walls, which gave a rich purple light through their stained transparency.

Roverton was still bewildered as he studied these details. Then, as remembrance returned, he understood. He and Volmar were on board the oval vessel; and the deep thrumming sound was the noise of the engines. If, as he had surmised, the vessel was an ether-ship, they were now in the midst of interplanetary space on their way to some unknown world!

Stunned and overwhelmed by the situation, he turned again to Volmar, and saw that the Captain was beginning to revive. His eyes opened, his fingers stirred; and then he lifted his right arm, rather feebly. A moment more, and he spoke.

"Where are we, Roverton?"

"I don't know, exactly. But we're all boxed up and ready for delivery to the zoo, wherever it is. And I think we are now in mid-space. In all likelihood the planet to which we are being taken is one that belongs to this same system. There are four worlds, as you will remember, and there's no telling which one is our destination. Our chances of ever seeing the *Alcyone* again are none too gaudy under the circumstances. Hell, what a prospect!"

"The situation is rather dubious, to say the least," assented Volmar, "Apart from our ignorance as to where we are being taken, and the practical impossibility of escape or rescue, we shall soon have the problems of air and food to cope with—problems for which there is no solution as far as I can see.

"Our air-masks and tanks have not been tampered with; and we had a twelve-hours' supply of compressed air when we left the *Alcyone*. But since we do not know how long we have been unconscious, we cannot

compute how much of the supply still remains; and in any case asphyxiation is highly probable at no remote time."

Roverton had been inspecting the cage with careful attention. He now noticed a curving metal tube which entered it through the floor at one end. Putting his hand over the mouth of the tube, he felt an air-current.

"I think," he remarked, "that our cage, and doubtless the others, are being supplied with some sort of compressed air—probably the atmosphere of the Mercurian world on which we were captured. No doubt the air in the room itself is that of the world to which the dwarfs are native, and is not respirable by these monsters."

The room had been untenanted, save for the earth-men and their fellow-captives. Now Volmar and Roverton saw that five of the opalescent dwarfs had suddenly appeared, carrying receptacles of exotic forms, some of which were filled with liquids and others with objects resembling truffles and tubers. The dwarfs proceeded to open a panel worked by some hidden spring in the side of each cage and then introduced into each a vessel filled with fluid and one filled with the unknown foodstuffs. This was done very quickly and cautiously, and a mechanical armlike apparatus was used in the actual transmission of the vessels. Afterwards the panels were closed immediately.

When all the cages had been supplied in this manner, the dwarfs stood watching their occupants, who in most cases were greedily absorbing the food and water. The earth-men perceived that the dwarfs were now without their masks, revealing a physiognomy with elaborate eyes, proboscides and antennae, such as might well be looked for in connection with their delicate bodies.

When they noticed that Volmar and Roverton made no effort to touch the provender, the five dwarfs gathered about their cage, eyeing them curiously and carrying on an eager discussion or disputation.

"I'm hungry and thirsty enough," confided Roverton to the Captain. "But how is one to eat and drink through a respirative mask—even granting that that stuff is fit for human consumption? However, I suppose the dwarfs think the masks are part of our anatomy, along with the suits and tanks. They must be pretty dumb not to realize that we are intelligent beings, who make use of artificial contrivances even as they themselves."

"Literal-mindedness isn't confined to human beings, I suspect," said Volmar. "These fellows are evidently taking us at our face value. They found us on the Mercurian world, along with the zoological specimens

they were collecting; and doubtless it never occurred to them that we might have come there in a space-ship, like themselves.

"Anyway they are probably so conceited as to believe that their own world is the only one capable of producing highly evolved and intelligent life-forms. Such conceit, as you know, is not unusual. I remember, back in my boyhood, before space-travel became an actuality, how many of our own astronomers and other scientists argued that the earth was the only world in all the universe that was inhabitable by any kind of organic life."

Presently the dwarfs departed; and time wore on. Overcome by their strange and perilous situation, the earth-men talked in a desultory manner, and lapsed into lengthening intervals of silence. They studied the interior of their prison, wondering if it would be possible to break out. The panes, whether of glass or some other transparent material, were enormously thick and were manifestly very strong; and anyway, escape would have been futile under the circumstances. Nevertheless, the idea appealed to them. Any sort of action, no matter how desperate or hopeless, seemed preferable to the monotony of supine waiting.

Roverton now inspected the vessel containing the tuber-like objects. It was made of earthenware and was quite heavy. Roverton emptied the contents on the floor, and then hurled the object with all his strength at one of the vitreous panes. There was a terrible crash; but to the amazement of himself and Volmar, neither the vessel nor the pane was broken or even splintered or cracked by the impact. Both the earthenware and the transparent material, it was obvious, were possessed of an iron toughness not characteristic of such substances in their mundane forms.

"Well, that's that." Roverton's tone was rueful. "I guess we're not going to bust out in a hurry."

He and Volmar were consumed by growing thirst and hunger. They began to eye the water and food-stuffs avidly.

"What do you say we try it?" Roverton suggested.

"Go ahead. If you survive, I'll experiment myself. But be careful."

Roverton unfastened his helmet and removed it very cautiously. He took a deep breath. The air in the cage was heavy, with a queer smell that stung his nostrils and smarted in his lungs. It was breathable enough, as far as he could tell, though its cumulative effect on the human respiratory mechanism was an uncertain quantity.

He raised the deep vessel containing the water to his lips, and sipped it. The fluid was semi-opaque and flavorless. Then, gingerly, he picked up one of the tubers, which was about the size and shape of a large

potato, and bit into it. The thing was tough-skinned, with a porous, fungoid-looking interior, and its taste was unpleasantly bitter. Roverton made a wry face, as he swallowed a scanty mouthful.

"Can't say that I care for the grub." He returned to the water and sipped a little more of it while Volmar proceeded to remove his own mask. Roverton then passed him the water and Volmar drank some of it cautiously and afterwards sampled one of the tubers but rejected it summarily without swallowing any of the unpalatable substance.

"I'm dubious of that stuff," he observed. "As you know, lots of things which are perfectly good foods for ultra-terrestrial life-forms are sheer poison for us. I hope you didn't swallow much of it."

"Only a little," rejoined Roverton. "And maybe the stuff is poisonous —I don't believe I feel so very well." A sudden sickness had come upon him, with vertigo and violent internal pains and he sat down on the floor of the cage.

Volmar began to feel a little sick himself; and since he had not eaten any of the tuber, he concluded that the unfamiliar water, and perhaps the air, were contributing to this condition. However, he did not develop the agonizing pains, fever and delirium which progressively characterized Roverton's case. Writhing consulvisely, moaning, and out of his head half the time, Roverton lay on the floor while Volmar watched beside him, totally unable, for lack of medicinal remedies or even precise knowledge, to do anything that would palliate his sufferings.

An hour or two passed in this manner without bringing any marked change in the sick man's condition. Absorbed in his vigil, Volmar did not perceive the approach of two dwarfs who had entered the room, till he heard the excited babble of their shrill voices. They were standing beside the cage and were gesticulating with much animation as they peered at himself and Roverton.

Volmar was puzzled by their excitement, till he remembered that he and Roverton were now without their masks and the dwarfs had never seen them before in such disattire. Evidently the discovery that the masks were artificial and removable had provoked much interest.

After a minute or so the dwarfs hastened from the room, and soon returned in company with half a dozen others, who surrounded the cage and peered at the earth-men with their bulging, many-angled orbs. Much debate was going on among them; but Volmar was too deeply worried about his comrade's condition to give more than a perfunctory attention to their gestures and crowding faces. Also he was beginning to feel a little light-headed, probably from some element in the air that

was ill-suited to human respiration. His brain attached no significance to the re-departure of one of the dwarfs; and even when this being came back a minute later, bearing two of the strange anaesthetic rods, Volmar remembered with apathetic slowness and indifference the former use which had been made of these instruments.

Very quickly and cautiously, one of the dwarfs opened a panel in the cage. Two others, standing in readiness with the rods, thrust their weapons with equal quickness through the opening and applied them to the two men. Instantly, as before, Volmar fell senseless; and the sick, delirious Roverton ceased to moan and mutter and lapsed into merciful oblivion.

The men awakened simultaneously from their second plunge into this mysterious anaesthesia. The circumstances under which they found themselves were even more baffling and more incredible than their confused senses could at first comprehend. It was evident at once that they were no longer on the ether-ship, for the room in which they were lying was very spacious and was walled and roofed and floored with an alabaster-like stone of great luster and beauty. There were many open windows, of an oval form, through which bewildering glimpses of an intricate alien architecture were visible against a glaring violet sky. The impression conveyed was that they were in an upper story of some lofty edifice. The air was pervaded by a tropic warmth.

They were lying on a broach couch, covered with a flossy, mottled material of red and saffron, and inclined at an angle of perhaps fifteen degrees. The room was furnished with several small tables, supported on frail, spidery legs and littered with outlandish implements and quaintly shaped vials such as the surgeons or chemists of an unknown world might employ. Except for Volmar and Roverton, the room was seemingly untenanted.

More curious even than their surroundings, however, were the sensations of the two men. Contrary to all natural expectation, there was no least trace of illness, hunger, thirst or fatigue on the part of either. Also, with a feeling that amounted to stupefaction, both realized that they were breathing a pure, well-oxygenated air—and that they were wearing their masks, which must have been replaced during their period of unconsciousness.

It seemed as if the air-supply in the tanks must in some unaccountable manner have been renewed by their captors. Both men were conscious of a singular buoyancy, a remarkable alertness and bodily well-being.

"Are you all right?" asked Volmar, as he sat up on the couch and turned to Roverton.

"Never better in my life. But I can't understand why I should feel that way. The last I can remember is being deadly sick in that infernal menangerie cage. And where are we, anyway? It certainly looks as if we had arrived somewhere."

"I judge," answered Volmar, "that we are on the particular planetary body to which our captors belong. Plainly, when they found us with our masks off, they realized that we were intelligent beings like themselves, and not mere monsters; and they have been treating us since with more consideration. They must have analyzed the remaining air in our tanks, and then replenished it with a synthetic substitute of their own. What else they've done to us I don't know. But probably we'll find out before long."

"Speaking for myself," said Roverton, "I feel as if I had been well-dined and wined, and had received a shot in the arm to boot. They must have found some way to feed us while we were unconscious—and something non-poisonous and assimilable by the human organism to feed us with."

"Truly," admitted Volmar, "it is a remarkable situation. I don't know how it will all end; but we are lucky to be alive under the circumstances. And no doubt there are some even more extraordinary experiences in store for us."

"I don't care how extraordinary they are," returned Roverton. "I'd rather be back on board the *Alcyone*. What do you suppose Jasper and Deming and the rest are doing anyway? There isn't one chance in a billion that they could follow us or find out what has happened to us. Probably they are combing that damned Mercurian planet in an effort to discover what has swallowed us up."

"They may have seen the departure of the strange ether-ship. Whether or not it would occur to them that we were on board is another matter. And even if they did figure this out, it would be a miracle if they could have done it quickly enough to follow the alien flier, keep it in sight, and locate its destination."

Before Roverton could reply, he and Volmar saw that three dwarfs were standing beside them. These beings were taller, with a more authoritative bearing, with more delicate antennae and proboscides than the ones they had seen on the space-vessel; and their coloration took deep red and orange and Tyrian tones. With queer, jerky genuflections,

like nodding insects, they addressed the men. Their words were scarcely articulate to human ears; but an idea of formal courtesy and obeisance was somehow conveyed.

Volmar and Roverton, rising to their feet, returned the greeting in the best manner they could muster.

Plucking the sleeves of the mens' clothing with their antennal fingers, with elaborate gestures whose meaning was obvious, the dwarfs led the way through an odd, elliptical door that had been concealed from sight in an angle of the wall. Thence, at the end of a short passage , the party emerged on a sort of balcony.

The earth-men gave an involuntary gasp of amazement and were seized by an instant dizziness as they approached the verge; for the balcony was merely a scant ledge without walls, railings or hand-holds of any kind; and below, at an awful depth, were the streets of a monstrous city. It was like looking down from a precipice into some alpine chasm.

All around and above there soared other buildings of the same white material and the same bizarre structure as the one on whose balcony the earth-men were standing. These edifices were of colossal extent and many of them culminated in airy spires and pinnacles of a fairy delicacy, thronging the bright purple heavens like a host of shining obelisks.

At frequently recurring intervals, the buildings were connected by bridges of a gossamer thinness and fragility, which formed a gleaming web-work in the air. They were wrought of that pale, alabastrine substance; and one of them issued, without sign of jointure, from the narrow ledge at the earth-men's feet, and ran to the midway story of a titan pile that was more than fifty yards distant.

The scene, in its crowding, multiform strangeness, was such as to bewilder and baffle human vision. All was incognizably foreign—a teeming babel of undreamt and baroque architectural forms. Far down in the abysmal streets, and on the lofty bridges, the frail people of the city passed like iridescent motes. All was weirdly silent, apart from certain recurrent rumblings and mutterings which seemed to come from underground, like the pulsing of hidden, gigantic engineries.

Spell-bounded by the vision, and dazed by its vistas, Volmar and Roverton became slowly aware that one of their guides had stepped from the balcony to the bridge and was signing them to follow.

"Holy smoke!" was Roverton's exclamation. "Are we supposed to walk on that?"

The railless bridge was barely a yard in width, and the drop to the street was terrific—at least a full half-mile. The guide, however, seemed to possess the equilibrium of a bird or an insect. His two companions were standing behind the earth-men, and were armed with weapons like double-pointed goads. As Volmar and Roverton hesitated, these beings came forward, lifting the formidable points in a gesture of menace.

"Well," said Volmar, "I guess we'd better move along. After all, the bridge isn't quite so bad as a tight-rope."

The earth-men followed their guide, who was tripping lightly and unconcernedly before them. Accustomed though they were to cosmic elevations, they still did not care to peer downward at the awful gulfs on either hand, but kept their eyes on the balcony ahead. With short and careful paces, they managed to cross the long, attenuated span. It seemed to take them a long time; and they gained their goal with much relief.

Looking back from their new vantage, they saw that the building they had left was much lower than those around it, and possessed a flat, towerless roof. Several glittering vessels, similar to the one in which they had travelled through space from the Mercurian world, were lying on the edge of this roof, which was plainly a landing-stage for such craft. Beyond, were rows of high towers, some of which were inclined at oblique angles and were inter-connected in the same fashion as the main structures.

They were now conducted into the heart of the edifice in which that precarious bridge had ended. Through labyrinthine corridors, and down slanting floors and serpentining stairs with awkward little steps, they were led for a distance impossible to estimate. They soon passed from purples daylight to the red, unflickering glare of columnar flames that issued from black, funnel-shapen vases.

The building appeared to be a sort of scientific laboratory. On every hand, in rooms of an asymmetrical construction, they saw the curious apparatus of a foreign and inconceivably advanced chemistry. People of the dwarf race were busy everywhere with arcanic tests and abstruse labors. They paid little heed to the earth-men, and were intently absorbed in the queer crucibles, vats, alembics and other mechanisms of a less classifiable nature which they tended.

At last the earthlings and their guides entered a vast room, filled with transparent cages, most of which were occupied by fearsome and variegated monsters. Among these, the men recognized certain of their for-

mer companions in captivity. Some of the creatures had been rendered unconscious; and dwarfs wearing atmospheric masks had entered their cages and by means of little suction-pumps attached to crystalline vials were extracting various amounts of the life-fluids, or perhaps of certain special glandular secretions, from the motionless monsters. Somewhat sickened, Volmar and Roverton watched the flowing of diverse-colored fluids into the vials as they went by.

"So that's the game," was Roverton's comment. "But I wonder what they use the stuff for."

"There's no telling. Those fluids may provide valuable serums for aught we know; or they may be used in the compounding of drugs, or even be employed as food."

Passing between endless rows of cages, they reached an open space at the center of the huge apartment. Here, from floor to ceiling, there ran a great circular upright tube of the same transparent material as the cages. It was at least eight feet in diameter. Pausing before it, the guide touched its apparently unbroken surface with his fingers, and a section of the wall swung open on almost invisible hinges, leaving a small doorway. Volmar and Roverton were motioned to enter.

They obeyed, with much wonder and dubiety, and the door was closed upon them. They found that they were standing on a floor of some nacreous mineral. Above them, where it met the ceiling at a height of thirty feet, the tube ended in a dull, greyish disk.

"Now what?" Roverton's voice was unnaturally loud and resonant in the closed columnar space.

A number of the laboratory attendants had gathered and were standing about the tube with their fantastic faces pressed against its wall. As if in answer to Roverton's query, one of them raised his arm with a swift and sweeping gesture.

It must have been a signal. Immediately, as if some hidden switch had been turned on, the earth-men were dazzled by a ruddy light that fell upon them from above. Glancing up, they saw that the grey disk had become luminous as a great fiery jewel. Soon the radiance changed from red to green, and then from green to blue, from blue to violet, from violet to an insupportable whiteness fraught with the immanence of ultra-spectral hues. Looking down, through the blurs of color that clung to their vision, the men saw that the floor was glowing like molten metal and was becoming translucent beneath the weird ray.

Then, all at once, they perceived an even stranger thing. Each saw that the vitriolene of his companion's suit had grown transparent, revealing every feature of head and body. Then the flesh itself grew gradually diaphanous, showing every bone and internal organ as if floating in some clear solution. Stage by stage, not with the shadowing of the X-ray, but with full color and minutest detail, the process went on, while the outer portions turned to a ghostly outline. Simultaneously, the men were aware of an icy sensation, that seemed to pierce their very vitals inch by inch along with the penetrating beam.

They felt a strange faintness, as if they were becoming actually insubstantial. All about them seemed to waver and recede, and they saw as from a fluctuating distance the intent, unreadable staring of the dwarfs.

The white ray was suddenly turned off, and the men resumed their normal tangibility of aspect. Both, however, were still faint and chilly from the unfamiliar force to which they had been subjected.

The door was opened, and they were signalled to come forth. They tottered with a queer weakness as they stepped out into the main room.

The dwarfs began to disperse, till only the three guides remained. Volmar and Roverton, reeling with a sickness that persisted and grew upon them, were led through halls and chambers of which they were hardly cognizant, and were thrust into a small room whose door was then closed with a gong-like clang. The room was occupied by four dwarfs who wore atmospheric masks, and was filled with mysterious implements that were sinister as those of a torture-chamber.

Here the men were directed to remove their suits and helmets. They obeyed, recovering sufficient mental clarity to realize that the air in the shut room was the same that they had been breathing from their tanks. Evidently it had been prepared for their reception.

Neither could remember fully afterwards the complicated and peculiar tests through which they were put during the next hour. Ill and confused and faint, they were dimly conscious of multiform instruments that were applied to their bodies, of changing lights that blinded them, of the purring and clicking of coiled mechanisms, and the high sibilant voices of their examiners conferring together. It was an ordeal such as no human beings had ever before undergone.

Toward the end, through clouds of numbness and confusion, they felt a stinging sensation in their chests, and each realized vaguely that an incision had been made in his flesh with a tiny tusklike knife and

that suction-pumps of the same type as those employed in drawing animal fluids from the caged monsters were being applied to these incisions.

Dully and half-obliviously, they watched the blood that was drawn slowly through thin black elastic tubes into squat-bellied bottles of gill capacity. Their brains were unable to attach any real meaning to this process; and it would not have occurred to them to resist. They accepted it as a part of a senseless and troublous delirium.

Both were on the point of virtual collapse from increasing malaise. They scarcely noticed when the tubes were withdrawn and the filled bottles corked and laid carefully aside. Nor did they perceive the subsequent action of their examiners till there came a sharp prickling in their shoulders. Almost instantly their senses cleared, and they saw that a light-green fluid was being injected into their veins by transparent hypodermics with double needles curved like serpents' teeth.

The fluid must have been a powerful drug, for evey sign of illness or even nervousness disappeared within a minute or two after its administration. Both men felt the same sense of well-being, of mental alertness and physical fitness and buoyancy, with which they had awakened from their period of unconsciousness. They surmised that they were not experiencing the effects of the drug for the first time.

"Well," remarked Roverton, "that dope is what you might call an all-round panacea. I don't feel as if there ever had been or ever could be anything the matter with me. The stuff seems to take the place of food, drink and medicine."

"It's a pretty fair tonic," agreed Volmar. "But watch out for the possible hang-over."

Now, with returning normality, they observed the vials of drawn blood; and the memory of what had happened came back to them with a new potentiality of significance.

"I hope," said Roverton, "that these people will be satisfied before they reach the dissection stage. Apparently they mean to learn all they can about us. Do you suppose they are trying to determine our fitness to become citizens of their world?"

"That's not so unlikely. Or perhaps they are trying to find out what use they can make of us, what particular sort of serum or gland-extract we might afford. Personally, I have an intuition that there is something pretty horrible behind all this."

The examination was seemingly over. The men were signalled to resume their clothing and helmets. Then the door was opened, and they were permitted to emerge. Their examiners followed, bringing the vials of blood, and removing the masks which had been worn for protection in that specially prepared atmosphere.

Many of the dwarfs in the outer room thronged curiously around and seemed to be questioning the examiners. These beings, however, were intent on some purpose of their own, and gave brief answers to the inquiries as they led Volmar and Roverton through the clustering laboratory workers and down a hall where the customary red flames that illumined the building were succeeded by others of a cold lunar blue.

Their destination proved to be a circular apartment with similar lighting. Here a dozen dwarfs were gathered, as if to await the earthmen and their conductors. All were the usual type in regard to size, formation and markings, with the exception of two who appeared to represent a cruder and more primitive race of the same species, with duller coloring and less finely developed proboscides and antennae.

Most of them were seated on spidery-looking stools arranged in a semi-circle. Some were armed with anaesthetic rods, and others carried instruments or weapons that consisted of thin ebon-black shafts with glowing cones of a cold green fire, possibly radio-active at one end. The two who suggested an aboriginal type were standing, and neither carried any weapon or implement. Near them was a little table on which hypodermics and other instruments were displayed.

"What's all this? Another test?" muttered Roverton.

"We'll soon see."

Two of the examiners, each bearing one of the vials of human blood in his delicate, sinuous fingers, came forward and conferred with the seated beings.

Then, by the former, two crystal hypodermics were filled with blood from the vials. Their bearers approached the aboriginals, who maintained a stolid and indifferent air, and proceeded to puncture the abdomens of their ant-shapen bodies with the fang-like needles and inject the blood till the hypodermics were empty.

All the assembled beings looked on in attentive silence, like a medical conclave. Volmar and Roverton, fascinated and a little horrified by this mysterious experiment, were unable to speak.

"Trying it on the dogs, eh?" Roverton finally whispered.

Volmar made no answer; and the words had barely passed Roverton's lips when the two aboriginals suddenly lost their impassivity and began to leap and twist as if in terrible pain. Then they fell to the floor with vehement cries that were half hisses, half shrieks. Both were swelling visibly, as if from the effects of some deadly poison; and the dull-hued integument of their bodies was blackening moment by moment. The injected venom of a hundred cobras could not have produced a more immediate or more appalling result.

"Who could have imagined that?" said Volmar, in low tones of dismay and consternation.

"It certainly looks as if human blood didn't mix very well with the life-fluid of these creatures." Roverton was too horrified to make any further or crisper comment.

The convulsions of the agonized victims were lessening by ghastly degrees; and their cries grew fainter, like the hiss of dying serpents. Their heads, bodies, and even their antennae, were puffed beyond recognition and had turned to a putrid purple-black. With a few final spasms and twitches, they lay still and did not stir again.

"Ugh! I hope the doctors are satisfied with their experiment." It was Roverton who spoke. He and Volmar tore their eyes away from the ghastly sight on the floor in time to see that one of the seated conclave-members had risen and was moving toward them, lifting as he came the ebon shaft with fiery terminal cone which he carried.

The use of this implement, the nature of the cold green flame, and the purpose of its bearer, were all equally uncertain. As the men afterwards reflected, the dwarf's intentions were not necessarily hostile, and may have been those of mere curiosity. But their nerves were on edge with all the cryptical, uncanny adventures and experiences they had gone through, and following on the hideous outcome of the experiment they had just beheld, the sudden movement of the dwarf was fraught with connotations of unknowable menace.

Roverton, who stood a little in advance of Volmar, sprang to one side before the dwarf, and seized the fragile-looking table that was supported on tarantula-like legs. Hypodermics, vials, and other utensils of an unknown medical art clattered on the floor, as he lifted the table and held it in front of him like a shield. Then, facing the suspected assailant, he began to retreat toward the open door with Volmar at his side.

The dwarf, it would seem, was puzzled or confounded by this action

for an instant. He paused, then came on with a loud, sibilant cry, waving his weapon. His confreres, rising from their seats in a body, also followed, and ran to intercept the men before they could escape from the room. Their movements were quick as the darting of angry insects.

Swinging the table aloft, Roverton hurled it in the face of his attacker. The creature was beaten down, releasing the lambent-headed wand as he fell; and it shot forward and dropped at Roverton's feet. In a flash, Roverton picked it up, and he and Volmar sprang for the door.

Two dwarfs, fleeter than the others, had managed to head them off and were standing on the threshold. Both were armed with the familiar anaesthetic rods.

Not knowing the properties of the implement which he had snatched from its fallen bearer, but surmising that it must have some efficacious use, Roverton charged the two beings in the doorway. His superior length of arm enabled him to smite one of them on the breast with the green cone, while he himself avoided their paralyzing weapons. The effect of his blow was amazing and terrific: the glowing cone, whatever it was, seemed to burn an instant way through the bodily substance of the dwarf, like white-hot iron in butter. The creature fell dead with a dark and gaping hole in his bosom, and Roverton, surprised and thrown off his balance, barely evaded the outflung rod of the other.

However, with a deftness that would have done honor to a professional swordsman, he swerved his weapon, almost continuing its initial movement, and smote the body of the second dwarf, who went down beside the first.

All this had occurred in a mere fraction of time, and a split-second of faltering or a single misstep would have been fatal. The earth-men leapt across the fallen bodies and cleared the threshold just in time to evade the main group of their pursuers.

They were in a long corridor, wholly deserted for the nonce, which led on one hand to the huge room of monster-cages, and on the other to parts as yet unknown. They chose the latter direction. Their situation was irredeemably desperate, and even if they could escape from the building, they would find themselves hemmed in at every turn by the perils and pitfalls of a world inevitably hostile to human life through its very strangeness. But, after their captivity, and the queer ordeals to which they had perforce submitted, it was good to move freely again,

even though their flight could only end in recapture or the unconceived horror or some strange death.

They sprinted down the corridor, with a dozen dwarfs at their heels, and found that their longer legs would enable them to distance their pursuers by degrees. At intervals they met others of the laboratory attendants, mostly unarmed, who leapt back in obvious terror before the lethal wand that Roverton brandished in their faces.

The earth-men also encountered a sleepy-looking monster like a sort of wingless dragon, which probably a pet. It was lying stretched across the hall; and it gave a torpid and protesting bellow as they hurdled its spiny back and continued their flight.

The corridor, lit by unwavering rubescent flames, ran straight for an interminable distance, and then turned at a sharp angle. Through open doors, or either side, the fleeing earth-men caught outlandish glimpses of incomprehensible activities.

Again the corridor turned, at a reverse angle; and its ruddy flames were succeeded by the glaring mauve of daylight. Volmar and Roverton emerged on a narrow balcony as the everswelling swarm of their pursuers came in sight.

Before them again was the vast, bewildering vision of the white city, with its web of alabaster bridges woven gossamerwise between buildings that were alabaster mountains with multi-angled scarps and strange pinnacles. It was noon in this world, for the sun which they knew as an unnamed star in Serpens, poured down from a vertical elevation the cruel and tyrannic splendor of its super-tropic beams to illumine the vertigo-breeding depth of the chasmal streets below.

The balcony, or ledge, was barely seven feet in width, and like all others in this preternatural architecture, was void of walls or railings. Doubtless it circled the whole edifice; and at frequent intervals there were bridges which connected it with the balconies of other mammoth piles.

Blinded by the glare and shrinking from the dreadful gulfs, the men followed the ledge for some distance, but paused in consternation when a horde of dwarfs issued from a door-way just ahead. These beings, it was plain, had been sent to intercept them.

The first group of pursuers, which now numbered at least a score, was closing in from behind. There were no accessible doors or windows

by which to re-enter the building; and the only means of continuing their flight was to cross one of those appalling bridges.

"Here goes," cried Roverton, panting, as he led the way along the slender span. The bridge was unoccupied; but it seemed preferable that he, being armed, should go first in case of possible opposition.

It was a mad race. The men dared not slacked their speed, for their pursuers, two abreast, were crowding the bridge behind them like ants. The danger of being overtaken gave them an added coolness and poise, and they ran with flying leaps on a path where the least indecision or miscalculation would have plunged them into the abyss.

They were nearing the opposing pile, when three dwarfs armed with the paralyzing rods, emerged from a door in its cyclopean mass and ran forward to meet them on the bridge.

Holding his own weapon like a lance, Roverton faced these beings without hesitation. It was a perilous combat, for two of them were side by side, and he could dispose of only one at a time. He struck and parried with lightning agility; and the two, with yawning holes in their thoraxes from the impact of the fearsome igneous cone, went down in swift succession and hurtled into the half-mile chasm beneath. The third, however, had advanced within reach of Roverton, and thrust viciously with his rod.

Roverton dodged, and would have lost his footing as he teetered within an inch of the verge, if Volmar, standing close behind, had not put out an arm to steady him. Missing, the third dwarf ran headlong upon Roverton's weapon, which pierced him through till his body hung impaled on the ebon shaft. Roverton disengaged it, and kicked the falling corpse aside to join its companions in the gulf.

The earth-men reached the opposite building without further interruption; but their pursuers had gained appreciably during the combat and were dogging them closely as they plunged into the new edifice.

This building, as far as they could tell, was wholly deserted; and it differed materially in its furnishings and apparent use from the one they had left. The unpeopled rooms into which they glanced as they hurried along a main hall, were panelled with fantastic paintings and designs that might have been astronomical maps. In some of them, there were huge globes and hemispheres of metal, and appliances like alien cosmospheres and planispheres.

An angle of the hall took the men temporarily beyond sight of their pursuers.

"Quick! let's find a hiding-place or a stairway," whispered Roverton.

They hesitated before a little door which gave on a dark chamber where the beams of the red fires in the hall were powerless to penetrate. Then, in an alcove, they perceived a flight of stairs.

Trusting that their pursuers would continue along the corridor, they began to ascend the stairs, taking three or four of the tiny steps at a leap. They would have preferred to descend, with the hope of eventually finding themselves on some sort of terra firma, but were deterred by an inexplicable noise, a metallic whirring and jarring, that suddenly started on the floors below. Above, there was utter silence.

"Haven't these people any elevator systems?" asked Roverton, after they had climed steadily for several minutes. "It must take them all eternity to go up and down in their skyscrapers like this."

"There may be some other method of transit; though probably it wouldn't be of any use to us without special knowledge regarding its mechanism."

For hours, it seemed, the earth-men toiled from story to story of that interminable edifice. The sounds of pursuit had died out; and apparently the dwarfs were still seeking them on lower levels. They met no one in all that endless range of red-lit stairs and rooms.

All had grown silent, except for the subterranean rumblings from beneath the city, which became fainter as they went upward. They must have been in the heart of the building; and at no time did they approach the outer rooms and balconies or attain even a far-off glimpse of sunlight. They ceased to count the number of floors they had ascended, and it seemed to them that they were lost in some awful, topless tower of eternity and infinity. They marvelled at the mania for space and magnitude which must have prompted this tiny people to rear such colossal structures.

Their legs were turning to lead, and each step was like the heaving of a mighty weight. They gasped for breath within their aerated helmets, and heard the pounding of heavy pulses in their temples like the roar of driven torrents.

"Where are we going, anyway?" questioned Roverton, as they paused for a momentary respite. "And why are we going there? The end is a foregone conclusion, with all the cards that are stacked against us.

There must be about a million deadly contingencies, I should think. We'll do well if we live long enough to exhaust our present supply of air."

"The air of this particular world might not be fatal to us," said Volmar. "We haven't sampled it yet, if you'll remember. Our dwarf friends were considerate enough, evidently, to re-fill our tanks with a chemical synthesis of the same air that they found in them."

"Well, I'd rather not try the local atmosphere till I have to. But what's the use of climbing any further? We've got the whole planet against us. Probably there are billions of these dwarfs with their devilish chemistry, all of them ready to hunt us down like wild beasts."

"Why worry about a little thing like that? Come on—there should be a good view from the top of this tower of Babel, when we get to it."

Following the slow, tedious spiral of the stairs, at length they saw a gleam of purple daylight above them, and came out on the building's roof, where a single central spire continued to escalade the heavens. The flat roof itself was crowded with orb-like mechanisms that were perhaps used for the observation of solar and stellar force. Crystal wheels and spheres were turning silently within larger spheres of the same substance.

No one was in sight, and the roof was seemingly unoccupied. But several aircraft were approaching, and fearing to be seen by their occupants, the earth-men entered a door in the great spire. Here they found a staircase, and resumed their eternal climb.

At the top they emerged in a curious open cupola whose lofty dome was filled with large perforations. The place was lined with instruments that were doubtless astronomical. There were cosmolabes and armillaries designed for a universe not measured heretofore by man; there were strange double and triple mirrors of white mineral with surfaces of baffling convex angles; there were lenses arranged behind each other in curving, semi-circular frames, and adjusted to an unhuman vision. In the center of the alabastrine floor, the men perceived a sable disk, perhaps four feet in diameter, and depressed about six inches below the floor level. From the middle of the disk, and close together, there rose two upright rods.

At first they did not see that the cupola was occupied. Then, behind the litter of strange appliances, they preceived a wizened and aged-looking dwarf, bowed above a sort of dial on which was slanting rows of

rubricated ciphers. He was unarmed, and did not hear the earth-men till they were close upon him. Then he turned and saw them.

Ungovernably startled, it would seem, by the apparition of beings who must have been supremely monstrous from his view-point, he darted away from the dial and sprang toward the black disk. Roverton intercepted him, being dubious on general principles regarding the intention of his movement. Terrified by the glowing weapon which the earth-men waved in his face, the dwarf circled back among the crowded instruments and contrived to elude both Volmar and Roverton and win the head of the stairs. There he disappeared from their ken at breakneck speed.

"Too bad we didn't get that fellow," said Roverton. "I wasn't anxious to hurt him, but now he'll spread the good word among the others as to where we are hiding. The whole pack will be here presently, if not sooner."

"Well, let's take a look at the view anyway, being as we're here."

They stepped to the verge of the open cupola, which was supported on a circle of thin pillars, and looked out on a staggering scene. They would see the whole extent of the mighty city, which reached for many miles in every direction, lying below them at a depth which turned the people in its streets to microscopic motes. Around the city was a landscape of ineffable bizarrerie, with wide canals of blood-red water that intersected each other to form terraced isles, and then wound away through fields and forests of a vegetation whose coloring was more violent than that of futuristic paintings. Beyond it all, in sharp, airless outline on the violescent heavens, were horn-like mountains of jetty black and others of a whiteness more dazzling than Pentelic marble.

"Golly," was Roverton's ejaculation. "The outlook is almost worth the climb. But I'd rather be seeing it from the *Alcyone*."

There came a confused babel of shrilling voices and a horde of dwarfs emerged on the roof below them and streamed toward the central spire.

"They couldn't have been so very far behind us, after all," Volmar commented. "And of course our friend the astronomer had told them how we invaded his observatory and dispossessed him."

Roverton was considering the various instruments in the cupola with an estimating eye. Some of them were set in the floor by means of metal bars and pivots, but many others were detached or loosely mounted. He

picked up a singular object of no less than seven concave lenses framed among rods and wires of malachite-colored metal. It was satisfyingly heavy and would make an effective missile.

"We can hold the stairs while the ammunition lasts," he said.

Volmar was lifting a small armillary to try its weight. Between them, the men collected everything movable in a great pile at the stair-head. They had no sooner finished doing this, when the foremost of their pursuers came in sight. The winding steps were packed with these creatures, most of whom were furnished with anaesthetic rods, ignescent wands, or other odd weapons.

The men began to hurl their fantastic missiles at the throng—a barrage of metal orbs and mirrors, and queer-angled things which may have served the purpose of telescopes, eye-glasses, and spectroscopes. The front rows of assailants were driven back with crushed heads and broken limbs, and many were slain or paralyzed by their own weapons as they went down in a tangled mass that blocked the stairway.

In an orderly manner, seemingly unperturbed by all these casualties, the dwarfs proceeded to clear away their dead and wounded, and then came on as before. More were swept down by the remainder of the observatory's detachable paraphernalia; and much havoc in particular was inflicted by two armillaries which Volmar raised in his arms and sent crashing into the vanward files.

The supply of missiles was now exhausted; but Roverton still retained his death-dealing wand, and Volmar had reserved a sort of lens-apparatus which he intended to use as a mace when their attackers came within reach.

With the same hideous unhuman imperturbability, after halting long enough to remove the victims of that final barrage, the dwarfs resumed their advance, while the earth-men awaited them at the stair-head.

Roverton, quick-eared and alert, as he watched the thronging onset, was aware of an odd noise from behind, as if something had clashed lightly against the cupola. Turning, he perceived that an air-vessel, shaped somewhat in the fashion of a long, crescent-prowed barge, but without wings or any visible agency of levitation, had attached itself by coiling tendril-like chains to the cupola-columns, and was discharging a dozen dwarfs into the observatory.

Roverton called Volmar's attention to the new danger.

"If you can hold the stairs, Captain, I'll tend to these customers," he

said, and sprang to meet the invaders. These latter were furnished with weapons of a kind which the earth-men had not hitherto encountered —long, trumpet-like tubes, which they levelled immediately at Roverton. Their curling fingers played on certain knobs which studded the tubes, and from the mouth of each weapon there issued a jet of pearly vapor. All were aiming at Roverton's head, and he surmised that the vapor was some sort of deadly gas or anaesthetic. The goggles of his mask were blinded by the fumes, and he could see nothing as he groped among the strange paraphernalia in the dome.

Tripping against some unseen object, and trying to save himself from a fall, he lurched forward and stepped down with a terrific jar on the broad central disk that was set below the floor-level.

Clear of the pearly fumes, which still played overhead, he saw his assailants for an instant, crowding toward him with their weird weapons, as he clutched with his free hand at one of the upright rods which rose from the disk. Then he heard Volmar cry out, and turned his head toward the Captain, jerking the rod involuntarily as he did so. He saw in the merest flash of time that Volmar had fallen, and was half-hidden by the dwarfs who thronged about him from the stairs. Then the scene vanished, as if a black curtain had rushed upward from it, and Roverton realized that the disk was dropping away beneath him with dizzy velocity in a long, dark shaft.

He surmised that he was in a sort of elevator. The jerking of the rod as he steadied himself in turning toward Volmar had started its downward flight. The thing was falling like a plummet, and he clung to the rod to keep from striking the walls of the shaft.

Soon, in the darkness, there came a series of red flashes, almost merging with one another. These must indicate openings from the shaft into the various floors of the main building. Doubtless, by manipulating one or other of the rods, he could check or reverse his descent. For a moment, he thought of trying to do the latter. He would go back to the tower and die fighting beside the fallen Volmar. But Volmar was dead—and what was the use?

Heart-sick, lost, unutterably confused and bewildered, he felt a black weariness descend upon him like the clinging of some material thing. His remaining will was broken, his initiative was crushed beneath it.

With a dull fatalism, a leaden despair, he watched the red flashes. There must be hundreds of them, he thought. He was plunging down to a world whose actual soil neither he nor any other man had yet trod-

den; before the end came, he would perhaps attain a glimpse of maddening, insuperable mysteries, and would pierce a little further among the all-encompassing terrors and perils of a hostile planet. He resigned himself. He was not yet weaponless, for the lethal wand, with its green cone glowing brightly in the darkness, was still clutched in his right hand.

Abruptly, with no noise or jarring, the elevator came to a full stop. Roverton's limbs and body were inundated by a stream of saffron light which poured into the shaft through a low doorway. At the same time, his ears were assailed by a medley of rumbling sounds and deep metallic throbbings which appeared to come from all around him. He had the feeling that he was underground, that his descent had precipitated him from that topmost tower into the nether vaults of the colossal city.

Cautiously he stooped and squeezed himself through the opening, which afforded ample passage for beings like the opalescent dwarfs but was rather scanty for a full-grown earth-man. Blinking in the saffron brilliance, he peered about him on a chamber so enormous, of such indeterminate scope that it seemed to partake of infinitude. It was filled with gigantic engines that appeared to use and combine every possible geometric form in their overbeetling bulks of dark stone and burnished metal.

The yellow light emanated from a sort of open vat or furnace in which was a glowing mass of molten substance. There were other flaming furnaces at intervals, and great red eyes that burned in many of the machines, pouring down a lurid effulgence.

From some of the mechanisms, huge, ramifying pipes went up and vanished in the darkness of a funnel-like dome. In the wildly flickering patches of light, and monstrous masses of shadow, Roverton saw dim, titanic figures, but did not realize at first that they were living beings. They were ten or twelve feet in height, and were strange and uncouth as the mechanisms which they tended. There were also two or three dwarfs, who appeared to be supervising their labors. Roverton surmised that he had stumbled into a power-plant of some unknown kind. The giants, mayhaps, were members of a subject people enslaved by the dwarfs and compelled to toil in their subterranean vaults.

The nearest furnace, watched by a single giant, was fifty feet away, and its warder had his back to Roverton. Hoping to escape observation in the vastness and gloom of the chamber, the earth-man started to

make his way toward certain of the towering mechanisms that were dark and seemingly untended. He had no idea where he was going or what he would find; and he had reached the exhaustion point, both physically and mentally.

The drug injected by the dwarfs seemed to be dying out in his veins, and he tottered with an intermittent weakness. Also, he was stunned by the loss of Volmar, his Captain and comrade. His brain, his senses, his muscles, were no longer functioning normally. It did not even occur to him that he might have stayed in the elevator shaft and found his way back to some other level where escape would not offer so many hazards.

He had nearly reached the shadow of a huge pyramidal mechanism, when one of the giants saw him and started in pursuit. The creature came on with lumbering, elephantine paces, and looking back as he fled, Roverton saw its face for the first time in the lurid furnace-glare. The thing was a biological nightmare, with one swollen, blazing, sulphur-yellow eye where the mouth would be in a human face, and all the rest a mass of writhing, viperish tentacles around a central slit. The limbs and body wrre no less monstrous than the face.

Roverton ran, in an access of horror-stimulated strength; and doubling in and out among the dark machines, he contrived to throw his clumsy pursuer off the track. But there were harsh roarings, audible above the noise of the engines, which indicated that others were joining in the chase. Also, he heard the shrill, sweet sibilation of one of the supervising dwarfs.

Luckily, this part of the chamber was untenanted. He ran madly, interminably in the semi-darkness, and came at last to the chamber's end. Here he discovered a dimly yawning exit, and plunged headlong through it on an inclined plane, going downward at an angle of twenty degrees. The place led to another vault, deserted and perhaps disused, where he would have found himself in utter darkness if it had not been for the glowing wand which he still carried. By its weird light, he saw the looming bulks of other massive engineries.

Hastening on between rows of these mechanisms, he heard the roar of pursuit and saw the red flare of moving lights behind him in the gloom. He fled on through an eternity of cyclopean metal cones and cylinders, of black retorts and flameless furnaces, and reached another exit. This led into what was plainly a natural cavern, with rough nodular walls in which he caught the glistening of pale, mercurial ores.

The cavern turned and twisted like a serpent, and soon began to nar-

row. Its floor and sides were damp with drippings, were mottled with a soft, oozy marl. His feet slipped in puddles from which loathly creatures, half-batrachian, half-insect, writhed and wriggled in sluggish alarm to avoid his feet.

With dimming senses and failing muscles, he still went on. His mind was becoming a partial blank: he had almost forgotten everthing that had happened, and the horror of it all was a vague amorphous blur. Even his own identity was doubtful as a half-remembered dream. He was only a dying atom of consciousness, lost in a monstrous world without meaning or reason, without boundary or end.

Slowly, obscurely, he perceived that something was retarding his progress. Long, whitish ropes and tendrils were hanging in a curtain from the cavern-roof; and he had blundered into them without seeing. What they were he could not imagine. His brain groped for analogies, for similes that he could not recall.

The ropes and tendrils seemed to be twining about him, growing over him, enmeshing him from head to foot like a web of whip-snakes; and some of them recoiled and twisted with an undulating motion at the touch of the fiery-headed wand in his hand.

Roverton fought instinctively to free himself, in a nightmare of dim terror and exhaustion. He swayed back and forth but the ropy meshes held tenaciously. He sank into a half-swoon, and the wand fell from his fingers; but he himself did not fall, but was supported by the clinging growths. What these were he never knew; but doubtless they belonged to some type of organism mid-way between the vegetable and animal kingdoms.

He heard voices, and saw a flash of light on the pale, hundred-stranded web that held him. With a start of returning consciousness, he knew that his pursuers had found him. But it did not seem to matter greatly. Nothing mattered, now that he had lost Volmar and had gone astray in the clueless labyrinth of a dark infinity.

Roverton's memories of what followed were partial and fragmentary. There were starts of full awareness during a period of semi-oblivion, in which he realized that he was being carried by the boa-thick arms of one of the giant laborers who had pursued him. By flashes of sullen, lurching light, he saw the unthinkable face of this creature above him, and saw the indistinct bulks of the subterranean mechanisms.

He seemed to go on for aeons in some underground avenue, cradled by an ever-swaying movement that lulled him to troubled drowsiness.

Then, all at once, though he knew not how nor where, he was going upward in a great abyss of darkness toward some far-off, watching eye of light, and metal chains were about him in lieu of the giant arms. He closed his lids to avert a feeling of dizziness. Then, after a little, his swoon became complete; and he saw no more till he opened his eyes in a glaring radiance.

For a while he could recall nothing of all that happened to him, could understand nothing on which he gazed. His eyes were half-blinded by a pitiless light, were assailed and stabbed by stupendous imageries. He seeming to be looking down into a violet-purple gulf, in which hung the inverted alabaster walls and portals and towers of a gigantic architecture; and he himself was suspended, as if by some reverse gravitation, from the bottom of this topsy-turvy world.

Then, all at once, he had the feeling that he was not alone. Turning his head with a great effort, he found to his incredulous amazement that Volmar, bound with thick leathery-looking cords to pegs in a metallic surface, was hanging beside him.

Whether Volmar was dead or alive, he could not yet know. The closed lids beneath the goggles of the Captain's mask were wan and still as marble. But Roverton felt a joyous surprise that they were together again, and the emotion served to revive him and clarify his muddled faculties. Yet he feared to speak, lest Volmar should not answer him.

There was an instant of uncanny *bouleversement,* while all about him seemed to whirl and circle like a mightly wheel. Then he knew that he was lying on his back and was staring up at the heavens between the buildings of that city to which he and Volmar had been conveyed in the alien ether-ship.

He tried to sit up, and discovered that he also was bound by means of leathery cords to the metal surface. His head alone was free, and twisting as far as he could, he saw that the Captain and himself were in the center of a wide street or square, with the people of the city standing about them in a solemn, silent crowd. The men were tied to something that appeared to be a sort of platform. Its area was indefinite, but it could not have risen more than a foot above the street-level.

Roverton felt the enigmatic gaze of the nacre-colored dwarfs, who were all looking on in absolute stillness. Beyond their crowding heads, beyond the myriad structures, at the end of an almost infinite avenue, he beheld a sinking sun that had nearly touched the horizon and was tinging the white towers with supernal rose and amethyst.

What was to happen, he wondered? Were he and Volmar destined as a sacrifice to some ultra-sidereal deity? Were they to be the victims of some occult, unknowable scientific experiment? The silence of the throng about them was laden with a meaning which he could not apprehend, and was ominous with unreadable secrets of a trans-cosmic psychology. He knew nothing, never would know anything, of this incomprehensible race.

The dead, utter silence was broken by a loud click, followed by a whirring sound as of some metal wheel or spring. The world beneath Roverton seemed to quiver and surge, the staring faces disappeared from his vision, and he saw that the thing to which Volmar and himself had been bound was rising rapidly in air among the fantastic bridges and structures of the white city.

Balconies rushed by him, he caught flying glimpses of the dwarf people who were passing to and fro on slender spans. Then he was level with the roofs and towers, and as these fell away beneath him, he had once more that horrible sensation of hanging downward, and felt that he was sinking into some unfathomable gulf. About him now there was nothing but empty space.

"Where are we?" A feeble voice had spoken at his side.

"Are you really alive?" cried Roverton, as he turned toward Volmar and saw that the pale eyelids had opened.

"Apparently we're both alive, incredible as the fact may be. But that isn't answering my question as to where we are."

"As far as I can tell, we are on some sort of anti-gravitational raft and are headed for outer space. Our hosts, it would seem, have definitely decided that you and I are undesirable aliens in their world. . . . But what happened to you in the tower? The last I saw, you had fallen; and I thought surely you were dead."

"I've certainly been dead to the particular planet which you say we are quitting. Those fellows started throwing their anaesthetic rods at me, while you were fighting the crew from the air-ship. One of them got me with the business-end—and that is the whole story as far as I am concerned. I suppose yours is about the same."

Roverton gave the Captain a brief outline of his own adventures, as well as he could recollect them.

"Then there was an elevator," said Volmar. "I wondered about that black disk the astronomer was in such a hurry to reach."

"It's a wonder they didn't kill us outright, considering all the damage

we inflicted," was Roverton's comment after a minute of silence. "Maybe they didn't mean to hurt us at all, in the beginning."

"Yes," said Volmar sadly, "we may have misunderstood them. Certainly that can happen all too easily, between members of such wholly divergent races, who have no medium of communication and, in all likelihood, no ideas of motivations in common."

Their ascent had continued at an undiminished rate. Though they were soaring into full sunlight, the sky had darkened rapidly and was taking on the ebon of ultra-atmospheric space. Stars were visible everywhere. They must be penetrating the planet's envelope of air; and they would soon reach the interstellar ether. The warmth of the world below had given place to a boreal cold that made itself felt through their insulated clothing.

"Well, I guess this is the end," said Volmar. "You and I will continue our spatial voyage indefinitely—but we won't be in a condition to know anything about it. A few more minutes and we will freeze so stiff that we could be broken into powder with a hammer. Then we will drift on in space, among the whirling suns and systems, and perhaps afford a third-rate meteor for some world whose gravitational influence is strong enough to attract the mechanism on which we are bound."

"Yes, I suppose it's the end. Well, good-bye, Captain."

"Good-bye, Roverton."

The cold stung like a million needles, then the stinging became blunted and both men began to feel drowsy. They would have fought the drowsiness, but there seemed to be no use in prolonging their period of suffering. Numbly, somnolently, they resigned themselves to the inevitable Lethe and closed their eyes on the black circle of space with its myriad suns.

A far-off thrumming, faint as with the gulfs of incomputable distance, but mechanically persistent, seemed to draw them back from the deadly depth into which they were sinking.

They opened their eyes. A long, shining bulk was poising above them in the heavens. It was the *Alcyone!* They rose toward it, they saw it veer and dip and soar again to keep pace with their ascent. It came close, it paralleled their flight with looming sides in which a man-hole had opened.

Grappling-irons were thrown out, and the thing on which they rode was caught and drawn level with the ether-ship. Then, incredibly, some-

one had emerged from the man-hole, was standing above them, was cutting their bonds with a knife. Strong arms lifted them, and carried them through the air-lock into the warm interior of the *Alcyone.*

Half an hour later, after a course of vigorous massage to ward off possible frost-bite, and a good meal to fortify their starved and exhausted systems, they lay in their bunks and exchanged narratives with Jasper and the crew.

Jasper, it seemed, had been impelled by an intuition of evil to follow them with three of the men when they did not return to the ship within an hour after starting for that saunter among the woods of the Mercurian world.

They had traced Volmar and Roverton readily by their footprints, and had found their automatics near the animal-burrow. From ther on, the trail was even plainer, with the multitude of strange tracks which gave evidence of capture by unknown beings.

Jasper and his companions had hastened on, running most of the way, and had sighted the alien space-flier in time to see the two men lifted aboard. The vessel had risen immediately afterwards and had flown slowly away in the twilight heavens, heading apparently for an orb which they identified as the second planet of the unnamed sun.

Hastening back to the *Alcyone,* they had given pursuit, and had managed to come in sight of the strange vessel once more, after many hours, as it landed in the white city at dawn. They had carefully located the huge, spireless building on whose roof it had gone down. Then, during the short, nine-hour day of the planet, they had hung aloof in space, waiting for darkness, with the intention of descending and making some effort to find Volmar and Roverton and rescue them.

Nursing this heroic and wholly desperate plan, they had seen the mechanism on which Roverton and the Captain were bound, floating up from the city like a mote in the fiery sunset, and had flown to investigate.

"Of all the lucky breaks!" said Roverton, when the tale was finished.

"With that kind of luck," added Volmar, "I don't think that anything can keep us from navigating one or two more solar systems, at least."

AN ADVENTURE IN FUTURITY

A SURVIVOR from the lost continents of Mu or Atlantis, appearing on our modern streets, would have seemed no stranger, no more different from others, than the man who called himself Conrad Elkins. And yet I have always found it difficult to define, even in my own thoughts, the many elements which served to constitute this strangeness.

It would seem (since we think mainly in words and are often dependent upon them for the clarification of our ideas) that the adjectives which would fitly describe Elkins were as yet non-existent in our vocabulary; that they could be found only in some unimaginably subtle, complex and refined language, such as might be developed through long cycles of elaborating culture and civilization on an older and riper planet than ours.

Even at first sight I was greatly struck—not to say startled—by the man's personality. Perhaps the thing which arrested me more than all else was the impossibility of assigning him to any known ethnic stock. It is my theory that no human being is so individual that he does not possess obvious ear-marks which place him immediately among the tribes of mankind; and I am prone to pride myself on a sedulously cultivated gift for analyzing off-hand the nationality and racial affiliations of any given person.

But Elkins baffled me: his extreme pallor, his fine hair and clear-cut lineaments were, in a general sense, indicative of Caucasian origin; yet I could not find the distinguishing features of any American, European or Asiatic branch of the white race. Also, I could not have told his age: he

seemed young, when one considered the smoothness of his face; and yet there was a hint of something incalculably old in his expression.

His garb was modish and well-tailored, with nothing in the least unusual or eccentric. In this, as in all other things, he gave always the subtle impression of desiring to avoid notice. He was a little under medium height and of strangely delicate build; and his features, considered by themselves, were almost effeminate, apart from the great brow of uncorrugated ivory, which resembled the one that we see in the portraits of Edgar Allan Poe.

The small, intricately convoluted ears, the short, deeply curved lips, and the queer exotic moulding of the sensitive nostrils all seemed to bespeak the possession of more highly developed senses than are normal to mankind. His eyes were very large and luminous, of an indescribable purplish color, and did not flinch, as I had occasion to observe, before the most intense light. His hands too were quite remarkable: in their extreme fineness, flexibility and vigor, they were the hands of a super-surgeon or a super-artist.

The man's habitual expression was wholly enigmatic. No one could have read his mind, and this not from any lack of mobility or expressiveness in the lineaments themselves, but rather, I felt sure, from the unknown character of his ideas and motivations. About him there was an aura of remote, recondite knowledge, of profound wisdom and aesthetic refinement. Assuredly he was a mystery from all angles; and anyone who has gone into chemistry as I have is almost inevitably a lover of mysteries. I made up my mind to learn all that I could concerning him.

I had seen Elkins a number of times, on the streets and in libraries and museums, before the beginning of our actual acquaintance. Indeed, the frequency of our meetings in the multitudinous babel of New York was so phenomenal that I soon decided that he must have lodgings near mine and was perhaps engaged in similar studies. I made inquiries regarding him from librarians and curators, but learned nothing more than his name and the fact that he had been reading the works of Havelock Ellis and other modern authorities on sex, as well as many books on biology, chemistry and physics.

The motives which prompted his visits to the Natural History and other museums were seemingly of a general nature. But evidently he was seeking to familiarize himself with certain branches of modern science

as well as archaeology. Being myself a student of chemistry, who had given nearly a decade of collegiate and post-graduate effort to the subject, and also several years of independent work and experimentation in my laboratory on Washington Square, my curiosity was touched with fraternal interest when I learned of Elkins' studies.

Others than myself, I found, had been struck by the man's appearance; but no one really knew anything about him. He was extremely taciturn, volunteering no information whatever regarding himself, though impeccably polite in all his dealings with others. Apparently he desired to avoid making friends or acquaintances—a far-from-difficult procedure in any large city. Yet oddly enough I did not find it hard to know him—which, as I later learned, was due to the fact that Elkins had somehow conceived an interest in me and also was well aware of my interest.

I came upon him one May afternoon as he was standing in the Natural History Museum before a case of artifacts from the Mounds of the Mississippi Valley. To all appearance he was deeply absorbed. I had made up my mind to address him on some pretext or another, when suddenly he forestalled me.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he said in a grave, finely modulated voice, "how many civilizations have been irretrievably lost, how many have been buried by deluge, glacial action and geological cataclysm, and also by profound social upheavals with their subsequent reversions to savagery?

"And do you ever think that present-day New York will some time be as fragmentary and fabulous as Troy or Zimbabwe? That archaeologists may delve in its ruins, beneath the sevenfold increment of later cities, and find a few rusting mechanisms of disputed use, and potteries of doubtful date, and inscriptions which no one can decipher?

"I assure you, this is not only probable but certain. The very history of America, in some future epoch, will become more or less legendary; and it would surprise you to know the theories and beliefs regarding the current civilization which will some day be prevalent."

"You speak as if you had some inside information on the subject," I replied half-jestingly.

Elkins gave me a quick, inscrutable glance.

"I am interested in all such things," he said. "And by the same token, Mr. Pastor, I believe you are something of a speculative thinker

yourself, along different lines. I have read your little thesis on the cosmic rays. Your idea, that these rays might become a source of illimitable power through concentration, appeals to me. I can safely say that the idea is quite ultra-modern."

I was surprised that he knew my name; but obviously he had made inquiries similar to mine. Also, of course, I was pleased by his familiarity with a treatise that was generally looked upon as being rather advanced, not to say fantastic, in its theories.

The ice being thus broken, the growth of our acquaintance was rapid. Elkins came to my rooms and laboratory many times; and I in turn was admitted to his own modest lodgings, which as I had surmised were only a few blocks away from mine on the same street.

A score of meetings, and the development of a quasi-friendship, left me as fundamentally ignorant concerning Elkins as I had been at first. I do not know why he liked me—perhaps it was the universal human need of a friend, inescapable at all times and in all places. But somehow the half-affectionate air which he soon adopted toward me did not make it any easier to ask the personal questions that seethed within me.

The more I came to know him, the more I was overcome by a sense of impossible seniority on his part—by the feeling that he must be older, and intellectually more evolved than myself, in a fashion that could not be measured by tabulated or classified knowledge. Strangely—since such a feeling has been unique in my experience—I was almost like a child before him, and grew to regard him with something of the awe which a child conceives toward an elder who is seemingly omniscient. Nor was the awe conditioned at first by anything which he actually said or did.

The furnishings of his rooms were as noncommittal as the man himself. There was nothing to seize upon as indicating his nationality and antecedents. However, I saw at once that he was a linguist, for there were books in at least four modern languages. One, which he told me he had just been reading, was a recent and voluminous German work on the physiology of sex.

"Are you really much interested in that stuff?" I ventured to ask. "There is, it seems to me, overmuch discussion and all too little knowledge regarding such matters."

"I agree with you," he rejoined. "One hears of special knowledge, but it fails to materialize on investigation. I thought that I had an object

in studying this branch of twentieth century science; but now I doubt greatly if there is anything of value to be learned."

I was struck by the tone of intellectual impersonality which he maintained in all our discussions, no matter what the subject. His range of information was obviously vast, and he gave the impression of boundless reserves, though there were certain avenues of science, generally looked upon as important in our day, to which he seemed to have given only a somewhat cursory and negligent attention.

I gathered that he did not think much of current medicine and surgery; and he startled me more than once by pronouncements on electricity and astronomy that were widely at variance with accepted ideas. Somehow, at most times he made me feel that he was discreetly curbing the full expression of his thoughts. He spoke of Einstein with respect and seemed to regard him as the one real thinker of the age, mentioning more than once with great approval his theories concerning time and space.

Elkins showed a tactful interest in my own chemical researches; but somehow I felt that he looked upon them as being rather elementary. Once in an unguarded manner, he spoke of the transmutation of metals as if it were already an accomplished everyday fact; explaining the reference, when I questioned him, as a rhetorical flight of imagination in which he had lost himself for the moment.

The late spring and early summer passed, and the mystery which had drawn me to Elkins was still unsolved. I did indeed learn from a casual remark that he was a native of North America—which failed to render his ethnic distinction any the less baffling. I decided that he must represent a reversion to some type whose lineaments have not been preserved in history, or must be one of those rare individuals who anticipate in themselves a whole era of the future evolution of the race. I will not deny that the truth occurred to me more than once; but how was I to know that the truth was a thing so utterly improbable?

Much as I had grown to admire and even revere him, Elkins was to me the most incomprehensible and alien being on earth; and I sensed in him a thousand differences of thought and emotion, and a world of unfamiliar knowledge which for some reason he was trying to withhold from my apprehension.

One day, toward the end of the summer, he said to me:

"I must leave New York before long, Hugh."

I was startled, since hitherto he had made no reference to leaving or to the duration of his stay.

"You are returning home, perhaps? I hope it will at least be possible for us to keep in touch with each other."

He gave me a long, unreadable glance.

"Yes, I am going home. But, odd as it may seem to you, there will be no possibility of future communication between us. We part for all time —unless you should care to accompany me."

My curiosity seethed anew at his cryptic words. Yet somehow I was still unable to ask the questions that arose to my lips.

"If you mean that as an invitation," I said, "I shall be glad to accept and pay you a visit sometime."

"Yes, it is an invitation," he rejoined gravely. "But before accepting, would you not prefer to know where you are going? Perhaps, when you hear the truth, you will not care to accept. And perhaps you will not even believe me."

For once, my inquisitiveness was stronger than my respect.

"Do you live on Mars or Saturn, then?"

He smiled. "No, I am a denizen of the Earth; though it may surprise you, in the present infantile condition of astronautics, to learn that I have made more than one voyage to Mars. I realize your natural curiosity concerning me; and an explanation is now necessary. If, when you have learned the truth, you still care to accompany me as my guest, I shall be overjoyed to take you with me and to offer you my hospitality for as long as you wish to remain."

He paused a moment. "The mystery that has troubled you will be fully explained when I tell you that I am not a man of your own era, but have come from a period far in the future—or what is known to you as the future. According to your notation, my proper time is about 15,000 A. D. My real name is Kronous Alkon—I have assumed the vaguely analogous one of Conrad Elkins, as well as the speech and garb of your time, for reasons which will be fairly obvious.

"At present I shall give you only a brief summary of the causes which prompted my visit to the twentieth century. It would require a long discourse to even offer you an adequate sketch of our social anatomy and problems; and I speak merely of one aspect.

"Humanity in our age is menaced with gradual extinction through an increasing overpreponderance of male children; and a method of sex-

control, which would restore in some degree the balance of nature, is urgently desired.

"Your age, the first great mechanistic era, is a well-nigh mythical period to us, and less known even than certain earlier periods, because of the all-engulfing savagery to which man reverted at its end. There ensued long dark ages, through which only the most fragmentary records survived, along with a legendry of vast, uncouth machines which the superstition of peoples identified with avenging demons. Perhaps they were not without reason, since the abuse of machinery was one of the main causes of your *débâcle*.

"Also, there remained a widespread popular belief, accepted even now by many of our scientists, that the people of the twentieth century could determine at will the sex of their offspring; and that the secret of this determination was lost in the ensuing barbarism, along with certain minor secrets of chemistry and metallurgy which no later civilization has ever re-discovered.

"The former belief has no doubt arisen because the sexes are well known to have been numerically equal in your time; and because they have not been equal since. For many thousands of years after the rebuilding of an enlightened civilization on the ruins of yours, girl-children predominated; and the whole world became a matriarchy.

"The period known as the Amazonian wars, which were the most sanguinary and merciless wars in history, put an end to the matriarchy by wiping out all but a few hundred thousand of the human race. These reverted to the most primitive conditions: there were more dark ages, and then, slowly, the evolution of our present cycle of renewed culture, in which the male predominates both numerically and intellectually. But our difficulties were not over.

"It was to recover the fabled secret of sex-determination that I came back through the ages, and have lived among you for a full year of twentieth century time. It has been a fascinating experience, and I have learned many things regarding the antique world which are altogether unknown and unverifiable to my fellows.

"Your crude, cumbrous machines and buildings are not unimpressive in their way; and your science is not without a few inklings of our later discoveries. But obviously you know even less regarding the mysterious laws of biology and sex than we do; your supposed method of determi-

nation is truly fabulous, and I have no reason for tarrying any longer in an alien epoch.

"Now to become personal. Hugh, you are the only friend I have cared to make in the epoch. Your mind is in some respects beyond the age; and though everything will seem different to you in our time, and much will be incomprehensible, I am sure you will find a surpassing interest in the world of 15,000 A. D. I shall of course provide you with a safe means of return to your own era whenever you wish. Will you go with me, Hugh?"

I could not reply for a moment. I was awed, astonished, bewildered even to stupefaction by the remarkable things that my friend had just told me. His statements were no less than miraculous—yet somehow they were not incredible. I did not doubt his veracity for an instant. After all, it was the only logical explanation of everything that puzzled me in Conrad Elkins.

"Of course I'll go with you," I cried, overcome and dazzled by the strange opportunity which he offered me.

There were a hundred obvious questions that I wanted to ask Elkins. Anticipating certain of these, he said:

"The machine in which I travelled through time is a vessel commonly used among us for space-travel. I will explain to you later the modification of the original mechanism which rendered possible a journey in that fourth-dimensional space known as time. I have reason to believe that the invention is wholly unique and has never been duplicated.

"I had nurtured for many years my project for visiting your period; and in preparation for this, I made a prolonged study of all available historic data bearing thereon, as well as the archaeological and literary remains of antique America. As I have said, the remains are fragmentary; but the language, being the root-stock of our own tongue, is fairly well-known to our scholars.

"I took pains to master it as far as possible; though I have since found that some of our pronunciations and definitions are erroneous; also, that the vocabulary is much ampler than we had supposed.

"I studied likewise the costumes of your period, of which a few plates are still extant, and made for myself habiliments which would enable me to pass unnoticed upon my arrival."

Elkins paused, and went to his clothes-closet. He opened it and

brought out a suit of some soft brown fabric. It was not badly tailored, though the cut was unfamiliar. Later, I found that the actual plate from which it had been designed belonged to the year 1940, ten years in advance of our own date.

Elkins went on. "My departure was carefully planned, and I am supposed to have gone on a voyage to the asteroids, several of which, notably Pallas, Vesta and Ceres, have been colonized by human beings for hundreds of years past.

"I made the actual time-journey in a state of unconsciousness. This, as you will soon learn, was inevitable because of the temporary abstraction from everything that creates or contributes to what we know as consciousness. I was prepared for it, and had made all the necessary calculations and adjustments beforehand, and had carefully synchronized the movement of the vessel in the time-dimension with the movement of the earth and the solar system in space. Geographically speaking, I would not move an inch during the entire trip.

"Rising to an elevation of thirty thousand feet above the earth, I started the time-mechanism. There was a period of absolute oblivion (a second or a million years would have seemed the same) and then, with the ceasing of the time-flight, I recovered my senses. Knowing that I was now in the twentieth century, if my calculations were correct, and not choosing to advertise my strangeness, I sought for a place where I could land quietly and without detection.

"The place which I selected after much circumnavigation and study was an inaccessible cliff in the Catskill Mountains, far from any settlement. There I descended at night and left my machine, whose presence was indetectible either from below or above. I finished my descent of the cliff by the use of an anti-gravitational device, and made my way from the wilderness.

"The next day I was in New York, where, for the most part, I have remained ever since and have carried on unobtrusively my studies of your civilization. For monetary needs, I had brought with me some disinterred coins of your period, and alse a few small ingots of chemically wrought gold."

He showed me one of the coins—a silver dollar that was stained almost beyond recognition, like an ancient obolus, by the oxidation of untold centuries. Then he brought out another garment from the clothes-closet—a short flaring tunic of dull red with a long graceful mantle that

could be detached at will, since it was fastened to the shoulders by two clasps of carven silver. The fabric, as well as the garment itself, was strange to me. Kronous also brought out a pair of sandals, vaguely resembling those of the ancients, though they were not made of leather but of some stiff, indestructible cloth.

"This," he said, "is the raiment in which I left Akameria, the America of 15,000 A. D. I will have a similar tunic made for you by some costume-tailor here in New York—and also sandals, though I suppose the sandals will have to be made of leather, since the material used in these is a chemical product of my own time. I am planning to leave the day after tomorrow, and I hope that will not be too soon for you."

"Indeed it won't," I replied. "I haven't many preparations to make —there's nothing to do but lock up the laboratory and phone a few friends that I am leaving for a world-tour of indefinite length. I don't imagine there'll be any search-parties."

Two days later, with an hour of daylight still before us, Elkins and I had reached the base of the unsurmountable cliff on which the time-machine was hidden. The last four hours of our journey had been on foot. We were in the wildest section of the Catskills; and staring up at the terrible mountain-wall, I felt an increased awe of my strange companion, who seemed to have no doubt whatever of his ability to scale it.

He opened a small satchel, whose contents he had not hitherto revealed to me, and took out the anti-gravitational device of which he had spoken. The thing was a hollow disk of some dull, unidentifiable metal, with chains of an equally ambiguous material which secured it to the body. Elkins showed me the simple operation of the mechanism which, he said, was electronic in its nature. Then he strapped it to his chest, set the apparatus running, and rose slowly in air till he reached the top of the precipice. There he disappeared from view; but a few moments later, the metal disk was lowered at the end of a long cord for my use in surmounting the cliff.

Following directions, I proceeded to adjust the mechanism and start it going. The feeling of utter weightlessness as I floated upward was a most unique experience. It was as if I were a feather wafted on an imperceptible air-current. Being unused to the apparatus, I did not understand the finer technique of movement beneath its influence; and when I came to the cliff-edge I would have continued to drift skyward if my companion had not reached out and stopped me.

I found myself standing beside him on a broad ledge overhung by another cliff which rose immediately above it. Certainly Elkins could not have chosen a safer hiding-place for this time-machine.

The vessel itself, whose door he now proceeded to unlock, was a long, spindle-shaped affair, evidently designed for swift movement in air or ether. It could not have carried more than three people. Inside, it was lined with lockers and machinery, and three great slings or cradles in which the driver and passengers were immovably suspended. This of course, was requisite during the loss of gravity and normal weight in ether-flight. Elkins said that he had found it equally convenient to strap himself into one of the slings during his voyage in time.

Both of us were still dressed in twentieth century attire. Elkins now donned the tunic and sandals of his own age, which he had brought along in the satchel together with the duplicates that had been made for me by a somewhat mystified costumer. These Ilkins directed me to put on. I obeyed, feeling like a masquerader in the odd garb.

"That is the last of Conrad Elkins," said my companion, pointing to his discarded suit. "Henceforth you must call me Kronous Alkon. Your name will seem pretty outlandish among us; so I think I will introduce you as Huno Paskon, a young colonial born on Pallas."

Kronous Alkon now busied himself with the machinery of the vessel. This, to my untrained eye, was awesomely intricate. He adjusted a series of movable rods that were set in a notched board, and seemed to be winding up a clock-like apparatus with a numbered dial and three hands. There were hundreds—perhaps thousands—of figures on the dial.

"That," he said, "is to control within precise limits the extent of our forward movement in the time-dimension. We are all set for the proper year, month and day."

He now fastened me, and then himself, in the complicated slings, and turned to a small key-board with many knobs and levers, which seemed to be distinct from the rest of themachinery.

"These," he said, "are the controls for atmosphere and ether-flight. Before turning on the time-power, I shall rise to a higher altitude and fly south for about fifty miles."

He turned one of the knobs. There was a low, drumming sound; but I would not have been conscious of any movement, if a sudden sunset-glow through the vessel's ports had not shown that we were rising above the level of the cliffs.

After a few minutes, Kronous Alkon moved one of the levers; and the drumming ceased. "The power of space-flight," he said, "is provided by atomic disintegration. Now, for the time-flight, I shall make use of a very different kind of power—a strange, complex energy derived from the repercussion of cosmic rays, which will transport us into what, for lack of a better name, is called the fourth dimension.

"Properly speaking, we will be outside of space, and, from a mundane view-point, will be non-existent. I assure you however that there is no danger. When the time-power shuts off automatically in 15,000 A. D., you and I will awaken as if from a deep sleep. The sensation of dropping off may prove rather terrific, but no more so than the taking of certain anaesthetics. Simply let yourself go and realize that there is nothing to fear."

He seized a large rod and gave it a powerful jerk. I felt as if I had received an electric shock that was tearing all my tissues apart and disintegrating me into my ultimate cells and molecules. In spite of the reassurance of Kronous Alkon, I was overwhelmed by an unspeakably confusing terror. I had the sensation of being divided into a million selves, all of which were whirling madly downward in the maelstrom of a darkening gulf. They seemed to go out one by one like sparks as they reached a certain level; till soon all were gone, and there was nothing anywhere but darkness and unconsciousness. . . .

I came to myself in a manner which was like the direct reversal of my descent into oblivion. First, there was that sense of remote and spark-like entities, which increased to a multitude, all of them drifting upward in cosmic gloom from an ultimate nadir; and then the gradual merging of these entities into one, as the interior of the time-machine resumed coherent outline around me. Then I saw before me the figure of Kronous Alkon, who had twisted about in his sling, and was smiling as he met my gaze. It seemed to me that I had slept for a long, long time.

My companion pressed a knob, and I had the feeling of one who descends in an elevator. It was not necessary for Kronous Alkon to tell me that we were sinking earthward. In less than a minute, trees and buildings were visible through the ports, and there was a slight jar as we landed.

"Now," said Kronous, "we are on my country estate near Djarma, the present capital of Akameria. Djarma is built on the ruins of the city of New York, but is hundreds of miles inland, since there have

been extensive geologic changes during the past 13,000 years. You will find that the climate is different too, for it is now sub-tropical. Weather conditions are pretty much under human control, and we have even reduced by artificial means the permanent areas of ice and snow at the poles."

He had unstrapped himself and was performing the same service for me. Then he opened the door of the vessel and motioned me to precede him. I was met by wafts of warm, perfume-laden air as I stepped out on a stone platform adjoining a sort of aerodrome—a great, shining edifice in which were housed various air-craft of unfamiliar types.

Not far away was another building, marked by a light, graceful architecture, with many tiers of open galleries, and high, fantastic, Eiffel-like towers. There were extensive gardens around this building; and broad fields of vegetables that I did not recognize ran away on each side of the distance. Somewhat apart, there stood a group of long, one-storied houses.

"My home," said Kronous. "I trust that everything is well. I left the estate in charge of my two cousins, Altus and Oron. Also, there is Trogh the Martian overseer, and a barracoon of Venusian slaves, who do all the agricultural labor. All our necessary menial and industrial tasks are performed by such slaves, who have been imported to earth for many generations, and are now becoming a problem in themselves. I hope there has not been any trouble during my absence."

I noticed that Kronous had taken from an inner pocket of his tunic a small rod, vaguely resembling a flash-light and having a ball of red glass or crystal at one end. This he was carrying in his hand.

"An electronic projector," he explained. "The current paralyzes, but does not kill, at any distance up to fifty yards. Sometimes we have to use such weapons when the slaves are recalcitrant. The Venusians are a low, vicious type and require careful handling.

We started toward the house, whose lower stories were half-concealed by tall trees and massed shrubbery. No sign of life was manifest, as we followed a winding path among fountains of colored marble, and palms and rhododendrons, and baroque, unearthly-looking plants and flowers that would have baffled a present-day botanist. Kronous told me that some of these latter were importations from Venus. The hot, humid air was saturated with odors which I found oppressive, but which Kronous appeared to inhale with delight.

Rounding a sharp turn in the path, we came to an open lawn immediately in front of the house. Here an unexpected and terrific scene revealed itself. Two men, attired like Kronous, and a huge, barrel-chested, spindle-legged being with an ugly head like that of a hydrocephalous frog, were fronting a horde of bestial creatures who would have made the Neanderthal man look like an example of classic beauty in comparison.

There must have been a score of these beings, many of whom were armed with clubs and stones, which they were hurling at the three who opposed them. Their brown-black bodies were clothed only with patches and tufts of coarse, purple hair; and perhaps half of their number were adorned with thick, bifurcated tails. These I learned later, were the females—the males, for some obscure evolutionary reason, being undistinguished in this respect.

"The slaves!" cried Kronous, as he ran forward with his projector leveled. Following him, I saw the fall of one of the two men beneath the impact of a large stone. A dozen of the slaves were lying senseless on the lawn; and I could see that the persons they were attacking were armed with projectors.

Our approach had not been noticed; and Kronous made deadly use of his weapon at close range, stretching slave after slave on the ground. Turning, and apparently recognizing their master, the remainder began to disperse sullenly. Their rout was completed by the heavy-chested giant, who hurled after them with his catapult-like arms much of the ammunition which they had dropped on beholding Kronous.

"I fear that Altus is badly hurt," said Kronous as we joined the little group on the lawn. The other man, whom Kronous now introduced to me as his cousing Oron, was stooping over the fallen figure and examining a hidden wound from which blood was streaming heavily amid the fine black hair. Oron, who acknowledged the introduction with a courteous nod, had himself been cut and bruised by several missiles.

The introduction had been made in English. Kronous and Oron now began to talk in a language that I could not understand. Apparently some explanation was being made regarding myself, for Oron gave me a quick, curious glance. The giant had ceased hurling stones and clubs after the departing Venusians, and now came to join us.

"That is Trogh, the Martian overseer," said Kronous to me. "Like all of his race he is extremely intelligent. They are an old people with the

immemorial civilization that has followed a different trend from ours but is not therefore necessarily inferior; and we of earth have learned much from them, though they are highly reserved and secretive."

The reddish-yellow body of the Martian was attired only in a black loin-cloth. His squat, toad-like features, under the high, bulging, knobby head, were impossible to read; and I was chilled by the sense of an unbridgeable evolutionary gulf as I looked into his icy green eyes.

Culture, wisdom, power, were manifest behind his gaze, but in forms that no human being was properly fitted to understand. He spoke in a harsh, guttural voice, evidently using human language, though the words were difficult to recognize as being in any way related to those employed by Kronous and Oron, because of an odd prolongation of the vowels and consonants.

Carrying among us the still unconscious form of Altus, Oron, Kronous, Trogh and myself entered the portico of the nearby house. Both the architecture and the material of this building were the most beautiful I had ever seen. Much use was made of arabesque arches and light decorative pillars. The material, which resembled a very translucent onyx, was, as Kronous told me, in reality a synthetic substance prepared by atomic transmutation.

Within, there were many couches covered with unknown opulent fabrics of superb design. The rooms were large, with lofty, vaulted ceilings; and in many cases were divided only by rows of pillars, or by tapestries. The furniture was of much beauty, with light, curving lines that conformed to the architecture; and some of it was made from gem-like materials and gorgeous metals that I could not name. There were scores of paintings and statues, mainly of the most bizarre and fantastic nature, and testifying to supreme technical skill. I learned that some of the paintings were first-hand depictions of scenes on alien planets.

We laid Altus on a couch. The man was indeed severely injured, and his breathing was slow and faint. In all likelihood he had suffered some degree of brain-consussion.

Kronous brought out a bulb-shaped mechanism ending in a hollow cone, which, he explained to me, was the generator of a force known as *osc*—a super-electric energy used in the treatment of wounds as well as of illness in general. It was of sovereign power in restoring the normal processes of health, no matter what the cause of derangement might be.

When the generator was set in action by Kronous, I saw the emission

of a green light from the hollow end, falling on the head of the wounded man. The pulse of Altus became stronger and he stirred a little, but did not awaken as yet. When Kronous turned off the green ray after a few minutes, he asked me to examine the wound; and I found that it was already beginning to heal.

"Altus will be perfectly well in two or three days," said Kronous.

"The real problem," he went on, "is the Venusians—and not only for me but for everyone else. It was a dreadful mistake to bring them to earth in the beginning; they are not only ferocious and intractable, but they breed with the most appalling fecundity, in opposition to the dwindling numbers of the human race. Already they outnumber us five to one; and in spite of our superior knowledge and weapons, I believe that they constitute our worst menace. All that they require is a little organization."

Evening had now fallen. Trogh had retired to his own quarters, presided over by his Martian wife, at some distance from the house. A meal consisting mainly of delicious fruit and vegetables, most of which were new to me, was served by Oron. I learned that one of the vegetables was a species of truffle imported from Venus. After we had eaten, a strong, delicately flavored liqueur, made from a fruit that vaguely resembled both the peach and the pineapple, was brought out in deep, slender glasses of crystal.

Kronous now spoke at some length. He told me that he had already confided the truth concerning his time-voyage and myself to Oron. "The reason I did not want my trip to be known," he said, "is because of the mechanical principle involved, which might be stolen or duplicated by some other inventor. And I am dubious of its value to mankind in general.

"We of the present era have learned not to abuse mechanical devices in the gross manner of earlier generations; but even so, it is not well that man should know too much. We have conquered space, and the conquest has entailed new perils. On the whole, I think it would be better if the conquest of time should remain an isolated exploit. I can trust Oron, and also Altus, to keep the secret."

He went on to speak of various things which he felt that it was necessary for me to know. "You will find," he soliloquized, "that our world is motivated by desires and ambitions very different from those which are most prevalent in your own. The mere struggle for existence,

for wealth and power, is almost alien to our comprehension. Crime is extremely rare among us, and we have few problems of administration or government. When such occur, they are submitted to the arbitration of a board of scientists.

"We have infinite leisure; and our aspirations are toward the conquest of remote knowledge, the creation of rare art-forms, and the enjoyment of varied intellectual and aesthetic sensations, aided by the long life-span, averaging three or four hundred years, which our mastery of disease has made possible. (I myself am 150 years old, as it may surprise you to learn.)

"I am not sure, however, that this mode of life has been wholly to our advantage. Perhaps through the very lack of struggle, of hardship, of difficulty, we are becoming effete and effeminate. But I think we will be put to a severe test before long.

"Coming as you have from a commercial age," he went on, "it will no doubt interest you to be told that half of our own commerce is interplanetary. There are whole fleets of ether-craft that ply between the earth, Mars, Venus, the moon and the asteroids. However, we are on the whole a commercial people. Apart from those of us who have chosen to live in cities, the remainder are mostly the owners of large plantations where everything necessary is produced or manufactured by slave-labor. It is, of course, only our dwindling numbers that have made this system possible.

"We possess the power, if we so desire, of manufacturing everything through a mode of chemical synthesis. However, we find that natural food-stuffs are preferable to the synthetic kind; and we make less use of our knowledge in this regard than you might suppose. Perhaps the chief use of our mastery of atomic conversion is in the making of fabrics and building-materials.

"There is much more that I might tell you; but you will see and learn for youself. Tomorrow morning, Oron and myself will begin to instruct you in our language."

Thus began several quiet weeks of life on Kronous' estate. I made rapid progress in the language, which bore about the same relation to English that English bears to Latin. I was given access to a fine and extensive library filled with the latest scientific works, with fiction and poetry of the latter-day world, and also a few rare items dating from periods which, though long subsequent to our own time, were neverthe-

less buried in the dust of antiquity. On several occasions Kronous took me through his laboratory, in which he could perform the most incredible marvels of atomic transformation, and feats of microscopic analysis that revealed a whole world in the electron. I realized that the science of our time was child's-play compared with that of the era into which I had been transported.

One day Kronous showed me a cabinet full of objects that had been recovered from the ruins of New York and other antique cities. Among them were porcelain dinner-plates, Masonic emblems, pearl necklaces, China door-knobs, twenty dollar gold-pieces, and sparkplugs. The sight of them, and the realization of their extreme age, combined with their homely familiarity, aroused in me the most violent nostalgia—an intolerably desperate homesickness for my own period. This feeling lasted for days; and Kronous did not show me any more ancient relics.

Altus had recovered fully from his wound; and I heard of no more insubordination from the slaves of Kronous. However, I could not forget the terrible scene which had formed my initiation into life on the estate. I saw many times the savage-looking Venusians, who went about their agricultural labors with a sullen air of mindless brooding; and I was told much concerning them.

Their ancestors were inhabitants of the deep and noisomely luxuriant jungles of Venus, where they lived under the most primitive conditions, in perpetual conflict with terrible animals and insects, and also with each other. They were cannibalistic by nature, and their habits in this respect had proven hard to curb. Every now and then on the plantation one of their number would disappear surreptitiously.

The slave-trade had flourished for several centuries, but had languished of late years, since those brought to earth had now multiplied in excess of the required quota. The original Venusian slaves were mostly, though not all, the captives of tribal raids and wars; and they had been purchased very cheaply by terrestrial traders in exchange for alcoholic liquors and edged weapons.

However, the Venusians had been willing to sell even members of their own tribes. Apparently there was little attachment or loyalty among them; and their instincts were those of wolves and tigers.

The Martians had come to earth mainly as traders; though their services were sometimes procurable for such positions as the one held by Trogh. They were taciturn and aloof; but they had permitted certain of

their chemical and astronomical discoveries to be utilized by human beings.

They were a philosophical race, much given to dreaming, and were universally addicted to the use of a strange drug, known as *gnultan*, the juice of a Martian weed. This drug was more powerful than opium or hashish, and gave rise to even wilder visions, but its effects were physically harmless. Its use had spread among human beings, till a law was passed forbidding its importation. It was still smuggled both by Martians and Terrestrials, in spite of all the efforts made to stop it; and addiction to the drug was still fairly common among humanity.

By means of radio and television, both of which were now employed in vastly simplified and improved forms, Kronous and his cousins were in hourly touch with the whole world of their time, and even with the earth-stations on Mars, Venus, the moon and the larger asteroids. I was privileged to see in their televisors many scenes that would have appeared like the maddest visions of delirium back in 1930.

We were posted on all the news of the world; and with my growing mastery of the language, I soon came to the point where I no longer required the interpretation of Kronous to understand the announcements. Much of this news was not reassuring, but served to confirm the prophetic fears that had been voiced by my host.

There were daily outbreaks on the part of Venusian slaves all over the planet; and in many cases much damage was inflicted before they could be subdued. Also, these outbreaks were beginning to display a mysterious concertion and a degree of mentality of which the Venusians had not hitherto been believed capable.

Acts of sabotage, as well as personal assaults, were increasingly common; and the sabotage in particular often shower a rational intelligence. Even at this early date, there were those who suspected that the Venusians were being aided and incited by the Martians; but there was no tangible proof of such abetting at the time.

One day, from Djarma, there came the news of that bizarre mineral plague known as the Black Rot. One by one the buildings in the suburbs of Djarma were being attacked by this novel disease, which caused their synthetic stone and metal to dissolve inch by inch in a fine black powder. The Rot was the work of a micro-organism which must somehow have been introduced from Venus, where its ravages had been noted in certain mountain-ranges. Its appearance on earth was a mys-

tery, but had all the air of another act of sabotage. It was capable of devouring half the elements known to chemistry; and off-hand, nothing could be discovered to arrest its progress, though all the Akamerian chemists were at work on the problem.

Kronous and I watched in the televisor the working of the Black Rot. Somehow, it was inexpressibly terrifying to see the slowly spreading area of silent and utter devastation, the crumbled or half-eaten buildings from which the occupants had fled. The thing had started on the outskirts of Djarma, and was steadily devouring the city in an ever-broadening arc.

All the best-known scientists of Akameria were summoned in conclave at Djarma to study the Rot and devise if possible a means of retardation. Kronous, who was a renowned chemist and microscopist, was among those called upon. He offered to take me with him, and of course I accepted with the utmost eagerness.

The trip was a matter of no more than forty miles, and we made it in a light air-vessel belonging to Kronous—a sort of monoplane run by atomic power.

Though I had already familiarized myself with many of the scenes of Djarma by television, the city was a source of absorbing fascination to me. It was far smaller than New York and was widely spaced, with many gardens and exuberant semi-tropical parks meandering through its whole extent. The architecture was nearly all of the same open, aerial type that I had seen in Kronous' home. The streets were broad and spacious and there were comparatively few large buildings. The whole effect was one of supreme grace and beauty.

The streets were not overcrowded with people, and no one ever seemed to be in a hurry. It was strange to see the grotesque Martians and bestial Venusians mingling everywhere with humans of the same type as Kronous. The stature and build of Kronous were above the average and it was rare to see a man who was taller than five feet six inches. I, of course, with my five feet eleven, was very conspicuous and attracted much attention.

The conclave of savants was being held in a large edifice, built expressly for such meetings, at the heart of Djarma. Entering, we found that about two hundred men, some of whom were extremely old and venerable, had already gathered in the council chamber. Much general discussion was going on; and those who had ideas to suggest were lis-

tened to in respectful silence. Kronous and I took seats amid the gathering. So intent were all these men on the problem to be solved, that few of them even vouchsafed me a curious glance.

Peering at the faces about me, I was awed by an impression of supreme intellectuality and wisdom—the garnered lore of incalculable ages. Also, on many of these countenances I perceived the marks of a world-old ennui, and the stamp of a vague sterility, an incipient decadence.

For some time, Kronous and I listened to the discussion that was in progress. Pondering the various data brought forward, I was struck by the fact that all the elements assailed by the Black Rot belonged at the opposite end of the scale from radium in regard to their atomic activity and explosiveness.

Sotto voce, I commented on this to Kronous. "Is it not possible," I suggested, "that radium might be of some use in combatting the plague? I believe you have told me that radium, like any other element, is easily manufacturable nowadays."

"That is a striking inspiration," said Kronous thoughtfully. "And it might be worth trying. With our chemical mastery we can make all the radium we need at will in our laboratories. With your permission I am going to broach the idea."

He arose and spoke briefly amid the attentive silence of the assembly. "Credit for the idea," he announced as he ended, "must be given to Huno Paskon, a young colonial from Pallas, whom I have brought to earth as my guest."

I felt myself abashed by the grave, unanimous gaze of these erudite and revered savants, who all eyed me in a manner that I could not fathom. Somehow, it seemed unthinkable presumptuous to have made any suggestion in their presence.

However, there appeared to me much serious debate going on—a widespread discussion in which the proposed use of radium was manifestly meeting with great favor. At last a venerable savant named Argo Kan, who was spokesman of the assembly, rose and said:

"I vote for an immediate trial of the method suggested by Kronous Alkon and Huno Paskon."

Others, one by one, stood up and cast similar verbal votes, till the motion had been approved by nearly everyone present.

The meeting then dispersed, and I learned from Kronous that work

was being immediately begun in local laboratories for the preparation of radium on a large scale and its utilization in the most effective form.

In less than an hour, several chemists were ready to visit the area of destruction with portable machines in which radium was disintegrated and used as a fine spray. It was magical in arresting the Black Rot, which had been eating its way continuously into the city, creeping from house to house along the crumbling pavements. The whole affected area, which now covered several square miles, was soon surrounded by a cordon of men equipped with the radium-machines; and, to the vast relief of the people of Djarma and Akameria, the plague was pronounced under control.

During our stay in Djarama, Kronous and I were guests in a fine building set apart for the use of visiting scientists. I was amazed at the sybaritic luxury developed by this people—a luxury which, though illimitably and unimaginably resourceful, was at no time in excess of the bounds of good taste.

There were baths that would have been the envy of a Roman emperor, and beds that would have reduced Cleopatra to beggary. We were lulled by rich, aerial music from no visible source, and were served with food and with all other necessities as if by intangible hands, at the mere verbal expression of a wish.

Of course, there was a mechanical secret to such wonders; but the secret was cleverly hidden, and the means never obtruded itself. Humbly I realized how far ahead of ourselves were these mn of 15,000 A.D., with their quiet and consummate mastery of natural laws—a mastery which none of them seemed to regard as being of any great value or importance.

I was somewhat embarrassed by the honor paid to myself as the originator of a means of retarding the Black Rot, and could only feel that my inspiration had been merely a fortunate accident. Compliments, both written and verbal, were showered upon me by scientific dignitaries; and it was only through the intercession of Kronous, who explained my aversion to publicity, that I was able to avoid numerous invitations.

Finding that he had certain business to transact, Kronous was not ready to return to his estate for several days. Since he could not devote all of his time to me, I formed the habit of going for long walks on the streets of Djarma and through its environs.

Walking slowly amid the changing scenes of a metropolis has al-

ways been a source of unending fascination for me. And of course, in this unfamiliar city of the future, where all was new and different, the lure of such wanderings was more than doubled. And the sensations of knowing that I trod above the ruins of New York, separated from my own period by 13,000 years with their inconceivable historic and telluric vicissitudes, was about the weirdest feeling that I had ever experienced.

It was a strange spectacle through which I sauntered. Vehicles were used, of a light, noiseless, gliding type without visible means of propulsion; and there were many air-vessels which flew deftly and silently overhead and discharged their passengers on the roofs or balconies of the high buildings. And the landing or departure of great, shinning ether-ships was an hourly occurrence. However, it was the throng of foot-passengers which engaged my attention most.

Both sexes and all ages were attired in gaily colored costumes. I was impressed by the practical absence of noise, tumult and hurry; all was orderly, tranquil, unconfused. From the scarcity of women in the crowd, I realized how true were the racial fears expressed by Kronous. The women whom I saw were seldom beautiful or attractive according to 20th Century standards; in fact, there was something almost lifeless and mechanical about them, almost sexless.

It was as if the sex had long reached the limit of its evolutionary development and was now in a state of stagnation or virtual retrogession. Such, I learned from Kronous, was indeed the case. But these women, because of their rarity and their value to the race were shielded and protected with great care. Polyandry was prevalent; and romantic love, or even strong passion, were unknown things in this latter-day world.

A horrible homesickness came over me at times as I roamed amid this alien throng and peered into shop-windows where outlandish foodstuffs and curiously wrought fabrics from foreign planets were often displayed. And the feeling would increase whenever I approached the Martian quarter, where dwelt a considerable colony of these mysterious outsiders.

Some of them had transported their own many-angled and asymmetrical architecture to earth. Their houses defied the rules of geometry—one might almost say those of gravity; and the streets about them were full of exotic odors, among which the stupefying reek of the drug *gnultan*

was predominant. The place allured me, even though it disturbed me; and I strolled often through the tortuous alleys, beyond which I would reach the open country and wander among luxuriant fields and palmy woods that were no less baffling and unfamiliar than the scenes of the city.

One afternoon I started out later than usual. As I passed through the city, I noticed that there were few Venusians in the throng and overheard rumors of fresh revolts. However, I paid little attention to these at the time.

Twilight had overtaken me when I turned back from the open country toward the Martian quarter. The sylvan wilderness, in which I had never met many people, was quieter than usual. I was following a narrow path bordered with thick shrubbery and palmettoes; and I began to hurry with a vague apprehensiveness, remembering the rumors I had heard. Heretofore I had been unafraid; but now in the thickening twilight I was aware of some indefinible menace; and I remembered that I had foolishly forgotten to arm myself with the electronic projector which Kronous had given me to carry in my wanderings.

I had not seen anyone in the neighborhood. But now, as I went along, I scrutinized the deepening shadows of the shrubbery on each side of the path. Suddenly I heard a sound behind me that was like the scuffling of heavy naked feet; and turning saw that seven or eight Venusians, several of them armed with clubs, were closing in upon me. They must have been crouching amid the leafage as I passed.

Their eyes gleamed like those of ravenous wolves in the twilight; and they uttered low, snarling, animal noises as they hurled themselves upon me. I avoided the viciously swinging weapons of the foremost and laid him out with a neat upper-cut; but the others were at me in a moment, using indiscriminately their clubs and dirty talons. I was aware of claws that tore my clothing and slashed my flesh; and then something descended upon my head with a dull crash, and I went down through reeling flame and whirling darkness to utter insensibility.

When I came to myself I was conscious at first only of my pain-racked head and limbs. The crown of my head was throbbing violently from the blow I had received. Then I heard a mutter of thick unhuman voices, and opening my eyes, beheld the flame-lit faces and bodies of a score of Venusians who were dancing around a great fire. I was lying on my back; and it required only a tentative effort at movement to tell

me that my hands and feet were bound. Another man, similarly bound and perhaps dead or dying, was stretched on the ground beside me.

I lay still, deeming it inadvisable to let the Venusians know that I had recovered consciousness, and watched the lurid scene. It was something out of Dante's Inferno, with the red reflection that ran bloodily on the uncouth, hairy limbs and hideous, demoniacal features of the interplanetary slaves. Their movements, though they had a semblance of some rude, horrible rhythm, were nearer to the capering of animals that they were to the dancing of even the lowest terrestrial savages; and I could not help but wonder that such beings had mastered the art of lighting a fire.

The use of fire, I was told, had been unknown to them in their own world till the advent of men. I remembered hearing also that they sometimes employed it nowadays in their cannibalistic revels, having acquired a taste for cooked meat. Likewise it was rumored of late that they were not averse to human flesh and that more than one unfortunate had fallen a victim to their practices.

Such reflections were not conducive to my peace of mind. Also, I was oddly disturbed by a large sheet of metal grating, lying near the fire and having a grotesque resemblance to a giant gridiron, which was visible at intervals between the whirling figures. At second glance I recognized it as a sort of perforated tray which was used in the dehydration of various fruits. It was about eight feet in length by four in width.

Suddenly I heard a whisper from the man beside me, whom I had supposed unconscious.

"They are waiting for the fire to die down," he said, almost inaudibly. "Then they will broil us alive over the coals on that sheet of metal.

I shuddered, though the information was far from novel or unexpected.

"How did they get you?" I enquired, in a tone as low as that of my interlocutor.

"I am, or was, the owner of these slaves," he answered. "They caught me unaware this time; but I believe, or hope, that my family has escaped. I made the mistake of thinking the slaves were thoroughly cowed from punishments that I inflicted not long ago. I gather that there has been a concerted revolt this afternoon, from what the savages themselves (whose speech I understand) have let drop. They are not so unintelligent as most people believe them to be; and I have a theory that the terrestrial climate has served to stimulate their mentality.

"They possess secret means of communication among themselves over the most unbelievable distances that are no less efficient than radio. I have long suspected, too, that they have a tacit understanding with the Martians, who are covertly abetting them. The micro-organism that caused the Black Rot was no doubt smuggled from Venus by the Martians in their ether-vessels; and there is no telling what sort of plague they will loose next. There are some queer and frightful things on those alien planets—things that are deadly to terrestrials though harmless enough to the natives. I fear that the end of human supremacy is near at hand."

We conversed in this fashion for some time; and I learned that the name of my fellow-captive was Jos Talar. In spite of our dire and seemingly hopeless predicament, he showed no evidence of fear; and the abstract, philosophical manner in which he viewed and discussed the situation was truly remarkable. But this, as I had occasion to observe, was characteristic of the temper of mankind in that era.

A full half hour must have passed, as we lay there bound and helpless. Then we saw that the huge fire was beginning to die down, revealing a vast bed of glowing coals. The light grew dimmer on the antic figures around it and the beast-like faces of the Venusians were more loathsome than ever in the lowering gloom.

The dancing ceased, as if at an unspoken signal; and several of the dancers left the circle and came to where Jos Talar and myself were lying. We could see the gloating of their obscene eyes and the slavering of their greedy mouths, as they dug their filthy talons into our flesh and dragged us roughly toward the fire.

In the meanwhile others had stretched the huge metal tray upon the bed of coals. All of them were eyeing us with a hyena-like avidity that made me shiver with sickness and repulsion.

I will not pretend that I was able to regard with any degree of complacency the prospect of becoming in the near future a Venusian *pièce de résistance*. But I nerved myself to the inevitable, reflecting that the agony would soon be over. Even if they did not knock us on the head beforehand, there would be a swift though terrible death on the bed of coals.

Our captors had now seized us by our feet and shoulders, as if they were about to fling us upon the improvised gridiron. There was an awful moment of suspense; and I wondered why the Venusians did not complete the expected action. Then I heard from their lips a low snarl-

ing, with an unmistakable note of alarm, and saw that all of them were watching the starlit heavens. They must have possessed keener senses than those of humanity, for at first I could neither see nor hear anything to justify their attention. Then, far-off among the stars, I perceived a moving light such as was carried by the Akamerian air-vessels.

At first I did not connect the light with any idea of possible rescue; and I wondered at the perturbation of the slaves. Then I realized that the light was flying very low and was descending straight toward the fire. It drew near with meteoric rapidity, till Jos Talar and myself and the cowering savages were illuminated by the full beams of the bluish searchlight. The vessel itself, like all of its kind, was almost noiseless; and it slid to earth and landed with preternatural speed and dexterity, within twenty paces of the fire.

Several men emerged from its dim bulk and ran toward us. The slaves had loosened their hold on Jos Talar and myself; and growling ferociously, they crouched as if ready to leap upon the advancing figures.

The men were all armed with tubular objects, which I supposed were the usual electronic projectors. They levelled them at the Venusians; and thin rays of flame, like those from acetylene torches, issued from them and stabbed across the gloom. Several of the savages screamed with agony and fell writhing to the ground.

One of them dropped among the coals and howled for a few instants like a demon who has been taken in some pitfall prepared for the damned. The others began to run but were followed by long slender beams that searched them out in their flight, dropping several more. Soon the survivors had disappeared from view in the darkness, and the fallen had ceased to writhe.

As our rescuers approached, and the glow of the dying fire illumed their faces, I saw that the foremost was Kronous Alkon. Some of the others I recognized as scientists whom I had met in Djarma.

Kronous Alkon knelt beside me and severed my bonds with a sharp knife, while someone else performed a like service for Jos Talar.

"Are you hurt?" asked Kronous.

"Not severely," I replied. "But you certainly came just in the proverbial nick of time. A moment more, and they would have thrown us upon the fire. Your coming is a miracle—I cannot imagine how it happened."

"That is easily explained," said Kronous as he helped me to my feet. "When you did not return this evening, I became alarmed; and knowing the usual directions of your wanderings I studied this part of the environs of Djarma very closely with a nocturnal televiser, which renders plainly visible the details of the darkest landscape.

"I soon located the Venusians and their fire and recognized one of the bound figures as being yourself. After that, it required only a few minutes for me to collect several companions, arm them, charter an air-vessel, and seek the spot indicated by the televisor. I am more than thankful that we arrived in time.

"There has been," he went on, "a world-wide revolt of the slaves during the past few hours. Two of the continents, Asia and Australia, are already in their hands; and a desperate struggle is going on throughout Akameria. We are no longer using the electronic projectors, which merely stun. The weapons we used tonight are heat-ray generators, which kill. But come—we must return to Djarma. I will tell you more afterwards."

Our flight to Djarma was uneventful; and Kronous and I were landed by our companions on the roof of the building in which we had been housed. Here we said good-by to Jos Talar, who went on with the rescuing scientists to find certain relatives and to learn if possible the fate of his family.

Kronous and I descended to our rooms, where we found Altus, who had just arrived from the estate. He told us that Oron had been killed in a terrific combat with the slaves that afternoon. Trogh had mysteriously disappeared; and Altus himself had been compelled to flee in one of the air-vessels belonging to Kronous. A truly horrible state of affairs.

My bruised head and lacerated body required attention, and Kronous gave an application of the green ray, which marvelously relieved all my pain and soreness. Altus, miraculously, had escaped injury this time in his hand-to-hand fighting with the slaves.

We sat for hours while Kronous told us the events of the day and while fresh reports continued to arrive. The world-situation had indeed become serious; and apart from the universal revolt of the slaves, many new and unlooked-for perils had disclosed themselves.

In the actual conflict the Venusians had suffered more heavily than the Terrestrials, and thousands of them had been slain and others compelled to flee before the superior weapons of mankind. But to counter-

balance this, a number of new and baffling plagues had been loosed by the savages, who, it was now universally felt, were being assisted in this regard by the Martians. In the western part of Akameria great clouds of a vicious and deadly Martian insect had appeared—an insect which multiplied with the most damnable rapidity.

In other sections gased had been freed in the air that were harmless to both Venusians and Martians but deleterious to human beings. Vegetable moulds from Venus, which fed like malignant parasites on all terrene plant-forms, had also been introduced in a hundred places; and no one knew what else the morrow would reveal in the way of extra-planetary pests and dangers. I thought of the prophecy of Jos Talar.

"At this rate," said Kronous, "the world will soon be rendered unhabitable for man. With our heat-rays and other weapons we might wipe out the revolutionists in time; but the plagues they have brought in are a different problem."

There was little sleep for any of us that night. We rose at early dawn, to learn the appalling news that the whole of Europe was now subject to the interplanetary slaves. The bacteria of a score of awful Martian and Venusian diseases, to which the outsiders had developed more or less immunity, were decimating the human population, and those who survived were unable to cope with their conquerors. Similar diseases were appearing in Akameria; and all the other plagues were spreading with malign celerity.

"We must go to my estate immediately and retrieve the time machine, which I left in the aerodrome," said Kronous to me. "You can then return to your own age—it is not fair to ask you to stay longer in a world that is nearing ultimate ruin and chaos. We, the last remnants of mankind, will fight it out as best we can; but the war is not yours."

I protested that I had no desire to leave him; that I would remain to the end; and also that I had implicit faith in the power of humanity to overcome its extra-terrestrial foes.

Kronous smiled, a little sadly. "Nevertheless," he persisted, "we must recover the time-machine. Thus your means of escape will be assured, no matter what happens. Will you go with me? I intend to make the trip this very forenoon."

Of course, I could not object to this; and I was eager to accompany him. Apart from any use which I myself might make of it, the time-machine was too rare and valuable a thing to be left at the mercy of Venu-

sian vandals, who might well destroy it in their campaign of nation-wide sabotage.

Kronous, Altus and myself made the brief trip in the same light air-vessel that had been used for the journey to Djarma. The fertile, luxuriant countryside with fronded woods and tall, airy spires of embowered mansions above which we had flown less than a week before was now patched and blotched with devastation. Many of the houses had been gutted by fire; and the ravages of the vegetable mould from Venus had blighted many fields and forests, whose grass and foliage rotted beneath it to a nauseous grey slime.

Approaching the estate of Kronous, we saw that we should arrive none too soon. The Venusians had fired the house, and even their own quarters, and columns of smoke were arising from the doomed edifices. A dozen slaves were nearing the aerodrome with the obvious intention of trying to set it on fire, or of destroying or damaging the vessels which it contained.

The features of Kronous were deadly pale with anger. He said nothing as he steered the atomic monoplane directly toward the slaves, who had now seen us and were running headlong in a futile effort to escape. Several of them had been carrying lighted torches, which they now dropped. We swooped upon them, flying only a few feet above the ground in the open space that surrounded the aerodrome.

Two of the slaves were caught and mangled by the sharp prow of the flier; and Altus and myself, using heat-ray projectors, accounted for five more as we passed them. Only three remained; and wheeling the vessel around in a sharp curve, and steering with one hand, Kronous himself dispatched them with his heat-ray.

We landed near the entrance of the aerodrome. Kronous went in; and a minute later, the time-vessel flew gently forth and settled on the platform. Kronous opened the door and called to me.

"You and I, Hugh, will return to Djarma in the time-ship; and Altus will take charge of the monoplane."

No more of the Venusians were in sight; though we saw enough of their handiwork as we circled above the plantation before starting for Djarma. Kronous sighed at the ruin that had been wrought, but otherwise gave no evidence of emotion, and maintained a stoical silence.

Half an hour later we were back in our apartments at Djarma; and the time-machine was securely housed in an aerodrome nearby. Since it

had all the appearance of a small interplanetary flier, no one but ourselves ever dreamt of its real nature and use.

Every hour brought fresh news of the national damage inflicted by the planetary aliens and their plagues. The Martians had now declared open hostility. Their first movement had been to destroy all the human embassies and trading-stations on Mars and to seize a vast amount of ether-shipping; but before these overt actions were generally known, they had also assumed the offensive everywher on earth.

They possessed a frightful weapon, the zero-ray, which could penetrate animal tissue in an instant with fatal frost-bite. This weapon had been kept a secret; its invention and mode of operation were obscure to human scientists; and it was no less lethal and effective than the heat-ray. A battle was now going on in the Martian quarter of Djarma; and the Martians were holding their own.

Air-vessels had tried dropping explosives on the quarter; but this was found to be more dangerous to humanity than to the Martians; for the latter were using some sort of unknown ray which detonated the explosives in mid-air, or even while they were still on board the air-vessels.

I was forced to marvel at the equanimity shown by the people of Akameria in the face of all these dire problems and dangers. Everywhere, scientists were coolly endeavoring to combat the new pests and were seeking to devise more efficacious weapons for use against the outsiders. No fear or alarm was exhibited by anyone. Probably the secret of this calm, impertubable attitude lay in the lofty mental evolution and philosophic detachment that had been universally attained by the human race through the past ages.

Knowing how insecure and impermanent was their tenure of existence among the inimical forces of the cosmos, men were prepared to meet their doom with resignation and dignity. Also, the race had grown old; and many, perhaps, were tired of the quotidian sameness of life and were ready to welcome anything, no matter how hazardous, in the nature of change.

Djarma was now full of refugees from the outlying plantations; and more were arriving hourly. But, gazing on the calm, unhurried throng, no one could have guessed the parlousness of the general situation. There was no evidence of strife or peril or apprehension; and even the war in the Martian quarter was conducted silently, since the weapons

employed were all noiseless. Some of the Martian buildings, however, had been fired by heat-rays; and a pall of black smoke was rising and mushrooming above the ruddy flames.

Djarma had suffered less, so far, than most of the other Akamerian centers. The whole country was in disorder, and all communication was becoming seriously deranged. However, a few hours after the return of Kronous, Altus and myself, there came from southern Akameria the warning of a new and more lethal plague than any which hitherto appeared.

A tiny venusian micro-organism, a sort of aerial algae, which spread and increased with phenomenal celerity, had been turned loose and was rendering the air unbreathable for human beings over a vast and ever-growing area. It was harmless to the Venusians themselves, for the thick, vaporous air of their native jungles was full of it; and though it was deleterious to the Martians, the latter had prepared themselves beforehand and were all equipped with respiratory masks and atmospheric filters.

But men were dying of slow asphyxiation, marked by the most painful pneumonic symptoms, wherever overtaken by the strange pest. It was visible in the air, which displayed a saffron color when invaded by the organism. For this reason, it soon became known as the Yellow Death.

Beyond the manufacture and distribution of air-masks on a large scale, nothing could be done by savants to combat the new plague. The saffron cloud was rolling northward hour by hour—a noiseless and irresitible doom; and the situation was indeed desperate. A conclave of scientists was called; and it was soon decided that humanity must evacuate the regions menaced by the deadly aerial scourge. The only resource was for men to retreat toward the Arctic circle and entrench themselves in dominions where the organism could not penetrate, since it thrived only in warm, tropical air.

"This," said Kronous to me, sorrowfully, "is a preparatory step toward our final abandonment of the earth. The planetary aliens have conquered, as I knew they would. The cycle of human domination has completed itself; and the future belongs to the Venusians and Martians. I venture to predict, however, that the Martians will soon enslave the Venusians and rule them with a far stricter hand than we humans."

He went on. "Hugh, the hour of our parting will soon arrive. You could leave us at any rate, as you know; but perhaps you will wish to see the drama to its end."

I pressed his hand but could say nothing. There was a tragic pathos in the swift doom which threatened the final remnant of the race. Remote and alien as these people were in many of their customs and ideas and feelings, they were still human. I admired their stoical courage in the face of irretrievable disaster; and for Kronous himself, after our long association and mutual vicissitudes, I had conceived a real affection.

All of Djarma was now astir with preparations for the northward flight. Every air-vessel or space-craft available was mustered for use; and more were being built with miraculous expedition. There were great air-liners and freighters in which personal belongings, food-supplies and laboratory equipment were transported; and the skies were thronged with their departure and their return for new cargoes. Perfect order and organization prevailed, and there was no trace of hurry or confusion anywhere.

Kronous, Altus and myself were among the last to leave. An immense bank of smoke was looming above the Martian quarter, and the weird, hydrocephalous inhabitants were being driven forth by the flames and were invading the deserted streets of the human section when we rose above the city in the time-vessel and steered northward. Far to the south, we could see a saffron cloud that had covered the horizon—the micro-organic plague that was smothering the whole of Akameria.

Beneath the guidance of Kronous, our vessel rose to a lofty elevation where more than the ordinary atmospheric speed was possible. Flying at seven hundred miles per hour, we soon neared the realms of perpetual winter and saw the sheeted ice of the polar regions glittering far below us.

Here humanity had already entrenched itself; and whole cities were being reared as if by magic amid the eternal wastes of snow. Laboratories and foundries were erected, where synthetic foods and fabrics and metals were prepared in immense quantities. The polar domains, however, were too inhospitable, and the climate too rigorous for a warmth-loving race, to form more than a way-station in the flight of humanity.

It was decided that the larger asteroids, which had long been successfully colonized by man, would form the most suitable cosmic refuge. A

great fleet of space-vessels was soon assembled in readiness for departure; more were built amid the ice and snow; and each day was marked by the arrival of ships from mid-ether, plying among the planets, which had been warned by radio of existing terrestrial conditions and had come to assist in the universal Hegira.

In those days, before the ultimate farewell, I came to know Kronous better than at any previous time. His altruism and imperturbable fortitude aroused my deepest admiration. Of course he had cast in his lot with the people of his own era, and official posts on one of the ether-liners had already been assigned to Altus and himself. Those who displayed any interest in the matter were informed by Kronous that I, Huno Paskon, intended to return alone in a small ether-vessel to Pallas, my supposedly natal asteroid. Even between ourselves, we seldom mentioned the real nature of my journey.

Kronous gave me careful instruction regarding the mechanism, both spatial and chronological, of the time-machine; but to avoid any error, he himself arranged all the controls in preparation for my flight through backward time. All that I would have to do was to turn on the power of the cosmic rays; and the machine would land me in 1930. Then after it landed, an automatic device would shoot it back to his own day.

The day of departure came, when vessels were ready for the intercosmic transportation of the world's remaining people. It was an awful and solemn moment. Ship by ship and fleet by fleet, from the ice-founded platforms on which they had been resting, the long bulks of glittering metal upon the Aurora Borealis and disappeared in the chill, dreadful gulfs of outer space. The ship to which Kronous had been assigned was one of the last to leave; and he and I stood for a long while beside the time-vessel and watched the soaring of those skyward flocks. Altus had already said a farewell to me and had gone aboard the great ether-liner.

For me, the hour was full of infinite sorrow and a strange excitement, in the realization that man was abandoning his immemorial home and would henceforward be an exile among the worlds. But the face of Kronous was a marble mask; and I could not surmise his thoughts and feelings.

At last he turned to me and smiled with an odd wistfulness. "It is time for me to go—and time for you also," he said. "Goodby, Hugh—

we shall not meet again. Remember me sometimes, and remember the final fate of the human race, when you are back in your own epoch."

He pressed my hand briefly and then climbed aboard the spaceliner; and he and Altus waved to me through the thick crystal of a sealed port as the huge vessel rose in air for its flight upon the interplanetary void. Sadly, regretting almost that I had not insisted upon accompanying them, I locked myself in the time-vessel and pulled the lever which would begin my own flight across the ages.

THE IMMEASURABLE HORROR

I DO not mean to boast when I say that cowardice has never been among my failings. It would be needless to boast, in view of my honorable record as an ether-ace in six interplanetary expeditions. But I tell you that I would not return to Venus for any consideration—not for all the platinum and radium in its mountainsides, nor all the medicinal saps and pollens and vegetable ambergris of its forests. There will always be men to imperil their lives and their sanity in the Venusian trading-posts, and fools who will still try to circumnavigate a world of unearthly dangers. But I have done my share, and I know that Venus was not designed for human nerves or human brains. The loathsome multiform fecundity of its overheated jungles ought to be enough for any one—not to mention the way in which so many posts with their buildings of neo-manganese steel have been wholly blotted out between the departure of one space-freighter and the arrival of the next. No, Venus was not meant for man. If you still doubt me, listen to my story.

I was with the first Venusian expedition, under the leadership of Admiral Carfax, in 1977. We were able to make no more than a mere landing, and were then compelled to return earthward because of our shortage of oxygen, due to a serious miscalculation regarding our needs. It was unsafe, we found, to breathe the thick, vapor-laden air of Venus for more than short intervals; and we couldn't afford to make an overdraft on our tanks. In 1979 we went back, more fully equipped for all contingencies this time, and landed on a high plateau near the equator. This plateau, being comparatively free from the noxious flora and fauna

of the abysmal steaming jungles, was to form the base of our explorations.

I felt signally honored when Admiral Carfax put me in charge of the planetary coaster whose various parts had been brought forth from the bowels of the huge ether-ship and fitted together for local use. I, Richard Harmon, was only an engineer, a third assistant pilot of the space-vessel, with no claim whatever to scientific renown; and the four men entrusted to my guidance were all experts of international fame. They were John Ashley, botanist, Aristide Rocher, geologist, Robert Manville, biologist and zoologist, and Hugo Markheim, head of the Interplanetary Survey. Carfax and the remaining sixteen of our party were to stay with the ether-ship till we returned and made our report. We were to follow the equator, landing often for close observations, and make, if feasible a complete circuit of the planet. In our absence, a second coaster was to be fitted together, in preparation for a longitudinal voyage around the poles.

The coaster was of that type which is now commonly used for flying at all levels within the terrestrial atmosphere. It was made of neonin-tempered aluminum, it was roomy and comfortable, with ports of synthetic crystal tougher than steel, and could be hermetically closed. There were the usual engines run by explosive atomic power, and a supplementary set of the old electro-solar turbines in case of emergency. The vessel was fitted with heating and refrigerating systems, and was armed with electronic machine-guns having a forty-mile range; and we carried for hand-weapons a plentiful supply of infra-red grenades, of heat-tubes and zero tubes, not knowing what hostile forms of life we might encounter. These weapons were the deadliest ever devised by man; and a child could have wiped out whole armies with them. But I could smile now at their inadequacy. . . .

The plateau on which we had landed was far up in a range which we named the Purple Mountains because they were covered from base to summit with enormous two-foot lichens of a rich Tyrian hue. There were similarly covered areas in the plateau, where the soil was too thin for the sustenance of more elaborate plant forms. Here, among the multitudinous geysers, and the horned, fantastic peaks that were intermittently visible through a steam-charged atmosphere, we had established ourselves in a lichen-field. Even here we had to wear our refrigerating suits and carry oxygen whenever we stepped out of the ether-ship; for

otherwise the heat would have parboiled us in a few minutes, and the ultra-terrestrial gases in the air would have speedily overpowered us. It was a weird business, putting the coaster together under such circumstances. With our huge inflated suits and masks of green vitrolium, we must have looked like a crew of demons toiling in the fumes of Gehenna.

I shall never forget the hour when the five of us who had been chosen for that first voyage of discovery said good-bye to Admiral Carfax and the others and stepped into the coaster. Somehow, there was a greater thrill about it than that which attended the beginning of our trip through sidereal space. The 23,000 miles of our proposed circuit would of course be a mere bagatelle: but what marvels and prodigies of unimagined life or landscape might we not find! If we had only known the truth! . . . but indeed it was fortunate that we could not know. . . .

Flying very slowly, as near to the ground as was practicable, we left the plateau and descended through a long jungle-invaded pass to the equatorial plains. Sometimes, even when we almost grazed the jungle-tops, we were caught in voluminous rolling masses of cloud; and sometimes there were spaces where we could see dimly ahead for a few miles, or could even discern the white-hot glaring of the dropsical sun that hung perpetually at zenith.

We could get only a vague idea of the vegetation beneath us. It was a blurred mass of bluish and whitish greens, of etiolated mauves and saffrons tinged with jade. But we could see that the growths were of unearthly height and density, and that many of them had the character of calamites and giant grasses rather than trees. For a long while we sought vainly an open space in which to alight and begin our investigations.

After we had flown on for an hour or two above the serried jungle, we crossed a great river that couldn't have been so very far below the boiling-point, to judge from the columns of steam that coiled upward from it. Here we could measure the height of the jungle, for the shores were lined with titanic reeds marked off in ten-yard segments, that rose for a hundred yards in air, and were overshadowed by the palm-ferns behind them. But even here there was no place for us to descend. We crossed other rivers, some of which would have made the Amazon look like a summer creek; and we must have gone on for another hour above that fuming everlasting forest ere we came to a clear spot of land.

We wondered about that clearing, even at first sight. It was a winding mile-wide swath in the jungle, whose end and beginning were both lost in the vapors. The purplish soil seemed to have been freshly cleared, and was clean and smooth as if a whole legion of steam-rollers had gone over it. We were immensely excited, thinking that it must be the work of intelligent beings—of whom, so far, we had found no slightest trace.

I brought the coaster gently down in the clearing, close to the jungle's edge; and donning our refrigerating suits and arming ourselves with heat-tubes, we unscrewed the seven-inch crystal of the manhole and emerged.

The curiosity we felt concerning that clearing was drowned in our wonder before the bordering forest. I doubt if I can give you any real idea of what it was like. The most exuberant tropical jungle on earth would have been a corn-patch in comparison. The sheer fertility of it was stupendous, terrifying, horrifying—everything was overgrown, overcrowded, with a fulsome rankness that pushed and swelled and mounted even as you watched it. Life was everywhere, seething, bursting, pullulating, rotting. I tell you, we could actually see it grow and decay, like a slow moving picture. And the variety of it was a botanist's nightmare. Ashley cursed like a longshoreman when he tried to classify some of the things we found. And Manville had his problems too, for all sorts of novel insects and animals were flopping, crawling, crashing and flying through the monstrous woods.

I'm almost afraid to describe some of those plants. The overlooming palm ferns with their poddy fronds of unwholesome mauve were bad enough. But the smaller things that grew beneath them, or sprouted from their boles and joints! Half of them were unspeakably parasitic; and many were plainly sarcophagous. There were bell-shaped flowers the size of wine-barrels that dripped a paralyzing fluid on anything that passed beneath them; and the carcasses of flying lizards and strange legless mammals were rotting in a circle about each of them, with the tips of new flowers starting from the putrefaction in which they had been seeded. There were vegetable webs in which squirming things had been caught—webs that were like a tangle of green, hairy ropes. There were broad, low-lying masses of fungoid white and yellow, that yielded like a bog to suck in the unwary creatures that had trodden upon them. And there were orchids of madly grotesque types that rooted themselves only

in the bodies of living animals; so that many of the fauna we saw were adorned with floral parasites.

Even though we were all armed with heat-tubes, we didn't care to go very far in those woods. New plants were shooting up all around us; and nearly everything, both animal and vegetable, seemed to have alimentary designs upon us. We had to turn our heat-tubes on the various tendrils and branches that coiled about us; and our suits were heavily dusted with the white pollen of carnivorous flowers—a pollen that was anesthetic to the helpless monsters on which it fell. Once a veritable behemoth with a dinosuar-like head and forelegs, loomed above us suddenly from the ferns it had trampled down, but fled with screams of deafening thunder when we leveled our heat-rays upon it until its armored hide began to sizzle. Long-legged serpents larger than anacondas were stalking about; and they were so vicious, and came in such increasing numbers, that we found it hard to discouage them. So we retreated toward the coaster.

When we came again to the clearing, where the soil had been perfectly bare a few minutes before, we saw that the tips of new trees and plants were already beginning to cover it. At their rate of growth, the coaster would have been lost to sight among them in an hour or two. We had almost forgotten the enigma of that clearing; but now the problem presented itself with renewed force.

"Harmon, that swath must have been made within the last hour!" exclaimed Manville to me as we climbed back into the vessel behind the others.

"If we follow it," I rejoined, "we'll soon find who, or what, is making it. Are you fellows game for a little side-trip?" I had closed the manhole and was now addressing all four of my companions.

There was no demur from any one, though the following of the swath would mean a diagonal divagation from our set course. All of us were tense with excitement and curiosity. No one could venture a surmise that seemed at all credible, concerning the agency that had left a mile-wide trail. And also we were undecided as to the direction of its progress.

I set the engines running, and with that familiar roar of disintegrating carbon atoms in the cylinders beneath us, we soared to the level of the fern-tops and I steered the coaster along the swatch in the direction toward which its nose happened to be pointing. However, we soon

found that we were on the wrong track; for the new growth below us became disproportionately taller and thicker, as the mighty jungle sought to refill the gap that had been cloven through its center. So I turned the coaster, and we went back in the opposite direction.

I don't believe we uttered half a dozen words among us as we followed the swath, and saw the dwindling of the plant-tops below till that bare purplish soil reappeared. We had no idea what we would find; and we were now too excited even for conjecture. I will readily admit that I, for one, felt a little nervous; the things we had already seen in the forest, together with that formidable recent clearing which no earthly machinery could have made, were enough to unsettle the equilibrium of the human system. As I have said before, I am no coward; and I have faced a variety of ultra-terrene perils without flinching. But already I began to suspect that we were among things which no earth-being was ever meant to face or even imagine. The hideous fertility of that jungle had almost sickened me. What, then, could be the agency that had cleared that jungle away more cleanly than a harvester running through a grain-field?

I watched the vapor-laden scene ahead in the reflector beside me; and the others all had their faces glued to the crystalline ports. Nothing untoward could be seen as yet; but I began to notice a slight, unaccountable increase of our speed. I had not increased the power—we had been running slowly, at no more than one hundred fifty miles per hour; and now we were gaining, as if we were borne in the sweep of some tremendous air-current or the pull of a magnetic force.

The vapors had closed in before us; now they eddied to each side, leaving the landscape visible for many mile for many miles. I think we all saw the Thing simultaneously; but no one spoke for a full thirty seconds. Then Manville muttered, very softly: "My God!"

In front, no more than a half-mile distant, the swath was filled from side to side with a moving mass of livid angleworm pink that rose above the jungle-tops. It was like a sheer cliff before us as we flew toward it. We could see that it was moving away from us, was creeping onward through the forest. The mass gave the impression of a jelly-fish consistency. It rose and fell, expanding and contracting in a slow rhythmic manner, with a noticeable deepening of color at each contraction.

"Life!" murmured Manville. "Life, in an unknown form, on a scale that would not be possible in our world."

The coaster was now rushing toward the worm-colored mass at more than two hundred miles an hour. A moment more, and we would have plunged into that palpitating wall. I turned the wheel sharply, and we veered to the left and rose with an odd sluggishness above the jungle, where we could look down. That sluggishness worried me, after our former headlong speed. It was as if we were fighting some new gravitational force of an unexpected potency.

We all had a feeling of actual nausea as we gazed down. There were leagues and leagues of that living substance; and the farther end was lost in the fuming vapors. It was moving faster than a man could run, with that horribly regular expansion and contraction, as if it were breathing. There were no visible limbs or appendages, no organs of any distinguishable kind; but we knew that the thing was alive and aware.

"Fly closer," whispered Manville. Horror and scientific fascination contended in his voice.

I steered diagonally downward and felt an increase of the strange pull against which we were fighting. I had to reverse the gears and turn on more power to prevent the vessel from plunging headlong. We hung above the pink mass at a hundred-yard elevation and watched it. It flowed beneath us like an unnatural river, in a flat, glistening tide.

"*Voyez!*" cried Rocher, who preferred to speak in his native tongue, though he knew English as well as any of us.

Two flying monsters, large as pterodactyls, were now circling above the mass not far below us. It seemed as if they, like the vessel, were struggling against a powerful downward attraction. Through the air-tight sound-valves we could hear the thunderous beating of their immense wings as they strove to rise and were drawn gradually toward the pink surface. As they neared it, the mass rose up in a mighty wave, and in the deep mouth-like hollow that formed at the wave's bottom a colorless fluid began to exude and collect in a pool. Then the wave curved over, caught the struggling monsters, and lapsed again to a level, slowly palpitating surface above its prey.

We waited a little; and I realized suddenly that the onward flowing of the mass had ceased. Except for that queer throbbing, it was now entirely quiescent. But somehow there was a deadly menace in its tranquillity, as if the thing were watching or meditating. Apparently it had

no eyes, no ears, no sense-organs of any sort; but I began to get the idea that in some unknowable manner, through senses beyond our apprehension, it was aware of our presence and was considering us attentively.

Now, all at once, I saw that the mass was no longer quiescent. It had begun to rise toward us, very stealthily and gradually, in a pyramidal ridge; and at the ridge's foot, even as before, a clear, transparent pool was gathering.

The coaster wavered and threatened to fall. The magnetic pull, whatever it was, had grown stronger than ever. I turned on fresh power; we rose with a painful, dragging slowness, and the ridge below shot abruptly into a pillar that loomed beside us and toppled over toward the vessel.

Before it could reach us, Manville had seized the switch that operated one of the machine-guns, had aimed it at the pillar and released a stream of disintegrative bolts that caused the overhanging menace to vanish like a melting arm of cloud. Below us the pyramidal base of the truncated pillar writhed and shuddered convulsively, and sank back once more into a level surface. The coaster soared dizzily, as if freed from a retarding weight; and reaching what I thought would be a safe elevation, we flew along the rim of the mass in an effort to determine its extent. And as we flew, the thing began to glide along beneath us at its former rate of progression.

I don't know how many miles of it there were, winding on through the monstrous jungle like a glacier of angleworm flesh. I tell you, the thing made me feel as if my solar plexus had gone wrong. There was neither head nor tail to that damnable mass, and nothing anywhere that we could identify as special organs; it was a weltering sea of life, of protoplasmic cells organized on a scale that staggered all preconceptions of biology. Manville was nearly out of his senses with excitement; and the rest of us were so profoundly shocked and overwhelmed that we began to wonder if the thing were real, or were merely an hallucination of nerves disordered by novel and terrific planetary forces.

Well, we came to the end of it at last, where the pink wave was eating its way through the jungle. Everything in its path was being crushed down and absorbed—the four-hundred-foot ferns, the giant grasses, the grotesque carnivorous plants and their victims, the flying, waddling, creeping and striding monsters of all types. And the thing made so lit-

tle sound—there was a low murmur like that of gently moving water, and the snap or swish of trees as they went down, but nothing more.

"I guess we might as well go on," observed Manville regretfully. "I'd like to analyze a section of that stuff; but we've seen what it can do; and I can't ask you to take any chances with the coaster."

"No," I agreed, "there's nothing to be done about it. So, if you gentlemen are all willing, we might as well resume our course."

I set the vessel back toward the equator, at a goodly speed.

"Christ! that stuff is following us!" cried Manville a minute later. He had been watching from a rear port.

Intent on steering forthrightly, it had not occurred to me to keep an eye on the thing. Now I looked into the rear reflector. The pink mass had changed its course, and was crawling along behind us, evidently at an increased rate of progression, for otherwise we would have been out of sight by now.

We all felt pretty creepy, I assure you. But it seemed ridiculous to imagine that the thing could overtake us. Even at our moderate speed, we were gaining upon it momently; and, if need be, we could treble our rate or soar to higher atmospheric levels. But even at that the whole business made a very disagreeable impression.

Before long we plunged into a belt of thick vapors and lost sight of our pursuer. We seemed to be traversing a sort of swamp, for we caught glimpses of titan reeds and mammoth aquatic plants amid winding stretches of voluminously steaming water. We heard the bellow of unknown leviathans, and saw the dim craning of their hideous heads on interminable necks as we passed. And once the coaster was covered with boiling spray from a marsh-geyser or volcano, and we flew blindly till we were out of it again. Then we crossed a lake of burning oil or mineral pitch, with flames that were half a mile in height; and the temperature rose uncomfortably in spite of our refrigerating system. Then there were more marshes, involved in rolling steam. And after an hour or two we emerged from the vapors, and another zone of prodigiously luxuriant jungle began to reveal its fronded tops below us.

Flying over that jungle was like moving in a hashish eternity. There was no end to it and no change—it simply went on and on through a world without limits or horizons. And the white, vaporous glare of the swollen sun, even at zenith, became a corroding torture to nerves and

brain. We all felt a terrific fatigue, more from the nervous tax than anything else. Manville and Rocher went to sleep, Markheim nodded at his post, and I began to watch for a place where I could bring the coaster safely down and take a nap myself. The vessel would have kept its own course, if I had set the gears; but I didn't want to miss anything, or take any chance of collision with a high mountain-range.

Well, it seemed there was no place to land in that interminable bristling wilderness of cyclopean growths. We flew on, and I grew sleepier and sleepier. Then, through the swirling mists ahead, I saw the vauge looming of low mountains. There were bare, needle-sharp peaks and long, gentle scaurs of a blackish stone, almost entirely covered with red and yellow lichens taller than heather. It all looked very peaceful and desolate. I brought the coaster down on a level shelf of one of the scaurs, and fell asleep almost before the heavy thudding of the engines had died.

I don't know what it was that awakened me. But I sat up with a start, with a preternaturally distinct awareness that something was wrong. I glanced around at my companions, who were all slumbering quietly. And then I peered into the reflectors, where the entire landscape about us was depicted.

I was unable to believe it for a moment—that worm-colored glacier that had crawled up the scarp beneath us, and was now hanging over the vessel like a sheer, immeasurable, flowing precipice. It had reached out in mighty arms on either side, as if to surround us. It seemed to blot out the misty heavens as it hung there, pulsing and darkening and all a-slaver with rills of a hueless liquid from the mouths that had formed in its front. I lost a few precious seconds ere I could start the atomic engines; and as the vessel rose, the top of that loathsome cliff lengthened out and fell over like the crest of a breaking billow. It caught us with a buffeting shock, it enveloped us, we went down tossing and pitching as into a sea-trough; and our interior grew dark and blind till I switched on the lights. The vessel was now lurching nose downward, as that unbelievable wave sucked it in. My companions were awake, and I shouted half-incoherent orders to them as I turned on the full power of our cylinders and also set the electro-solar turbines going. The sides and ceiling of the coaster seemed to bend inward with the pressure as we sought to wrench ourselves free. My companions had flown to the machine-guns, they pumped them incessantly, and bolts of

electronic force tore like a broadside of lightning into the mass that had engulfed us. We tried literally to blast ourselves out, with each gun revolving at the widest possible radius. I don't know how it was ever done; but at last the pressure above us began to give, there was a glimmering of light through our rear ports, and pitching dizzily, we broke loose. But even as the light returned, something dripped on my bare arms from the ceiling—a thin rill of water-clear fluid that seared like vitriol and almost laid me out with the sheer agony as it ate into my flesh. I heard some one scream and fall, and turning my head, saw Manville writhing on the floor beneath a steady drip of the same fluid. The roof and walls of the coaster were rent in several places, and some of the rifts were widening momently. That execrable liquid, which doubtless served as both saliva and digestive juice, had been eating the adamantine-tempered metal like acid, and we had not escaped any too soon.

The next few minutes were worse than a whole herd of nightmares. Even with our double engine-power, even with the machine-guns still tearing at the mass beside us, it was a struggle to get away, to combat the malign extra-gravitational magnetism of that hellish life-substance. And all the while, Venusian air was pouring in through the rents and our atmosphere was becoming unbreathable. Also the refrigerating system was half useless now, and we sweltered in a steaming inferno, till each of us donned his air-tight insulative suit in turn, while the others held to the guns and the steering. Manville had ceased to writhe, and we saw that he was dead. We would not have dared to look at him overlong, even if there had been time; for half his face and body were eaten away by the corroding liquid. We soared gradually, till we could look down on the horror that had so nearly devoured us. There it was, mile on mile of it stretching up the mountain-side, with the farther end somewhere in the jungle below. It seemed impossible, in view of the distance we had traversed, that the thing was the same life-mass we had met earlier in the day. But whatever it was, it must have smelt us out somehow; and seemingly it didn't mind scaling a mountain to get us. Or perhaps it was in the habit of climbing mountains. Anyway, it was hard to discourage, for our gun-fire seemed to make mere pin-holes in it that closed up again when the gunner's aim shifted. And when we started to drop grenades upon it from our hard-won elevation, it merely throbbed and heaved a little more vehemently, and darkened to a cancerous red as if it were getting angry. And when we flew off on the way

we had come, toward the jungle and the swamp beyond, the damnable thing started to flow backward beneath us along the lichen-mantled slope. Evidently it was determined to have us.

I reeled in the seat with the pain of my seared arms as I held our course. We were in no condition to continue the circuit of Venus; and there was nothing for it but a return to the Purple Mountains.

We flew at top speed, but that flowing mass of life—protoplasm, organism, or whatever it was—fairly raced us. At last we got ahead of it, where it slithered in mile-wide devastation through the jungle—but not very far ahead at that. It hung on interminably, and we all grew sick with watching it.

Suddenly we saw that the thing had ceased to follow us, and was veering off at a sharp angle.

"What do you make of that?" cried Markheim. We were all so amazed by the cessation of pursuit, that I halted the vessel and we hung in midair, wondering what had happened.

Then we saw. Another endless mass, of a vermin-like gray, was crawling through the jungle to meet the pink mass. The two seemed to rise up in sheer columns, like warring serpents, as they neared each other. Then they came together; and we could see that they were battling, were devouring each other, were gaining and losing alternately as they flowed back and forth in a huge area from which all vegetation was speedily blotted. At length the pink mass appeared to have won a decisive victory; it poured on and on, without cease, ingesting the other, driving it back. And we watched no longer, but resumed our flight toward the Purple Mountains.

I have no very distinct recollection of that flight: it is all a blur of incalescent vapors, of boundless, fuming forests, of blazing bitumen lakes and volcano-spouting marshes. I lived in a reeling eternity of pain, sickness, vertigo; and, toward the last, a raging delirium in which I was no longer aware of my surroundings; except by fits and starts. I don't know how I held on, how I kept the course: my subliminal mind must have done it, I suppose. The others were all pretty sick, too, and could not have helped me. I seemed to be fighting an immeasurable, formless monster in that delirium; and after a dozen eons of inconclusive combat, I came out of it long enough to see that the Purple Mountains were jutting their horns from the vapors just ahead. Dimly I steered along the jungle-taken pass and across the plateau; and the glar-

ing heavens turned to a sea of blackness, a sea that fell and bore me down to oblivion as I landed the coaster beside the glimmering bulk of the ether-ship.

Somehow, very tortuously and vaguely, I floated out of that sea of blackness. I seemed to take hours in regaining full awareness; and the process was painful and confusing, as if my brain were unwilling to function. When I finally came to myself, I was lying in my bunk on the ether-ship, and Admiral Carfax and the two doctors of the expedition were beside me, together with Markheim and Rocher. They told me I had been unconscious for fifty hours. My collapse, they thought, had been partly due to unnatural nerve-strain and shock. But my arms were both in a terrible state from the ravages of the vitriolic animal fluid that had had dripped upon them. It had been necessary to amputate my left arm at the elbow; and only the most skilful care had saved the other from a like fate. My companions, though ill to the point of nausea, had retained consciousness, and had told the story of our unbelievable adventures.

"I don't see how you drove the coaster," said Carfax. This, from our reticent and praise-sparing chief, was an actual brevet.

My right arm was a long time in healing—indeed, it never became quite normal again, never regained the muscular strength and nervous quickness required for aviation or space-flying. And I wasn't so sorry, either: my nerves were badly shaken; and I was content to let others do their share, when the holes in the acid-eaten coaster had been calked with metal melted by our heat-tubes, and another exploring party was sent out along the equator.

We waited for a hundred hours on the plateau in the Purple Mountains; but the coaster didn't return. Radio communication with it had ceased after the first nine hours. The second coaster was put together, and went out with Admiral Carfax himself in charge. Markheim and Rocher also insisted on going along. We kept in touch with the vessel till it began to approach the enormous tundras in which the sunlit hemisphere of Venus terminates, and beyond which are the frozen realms of perpetual twilight and darkness. The radio reports were full of incredible things, and I won't tell you how many of those moving life-masses were sighted, eating their way through the hideously fertile jungles or crawling out of the steam-enveloped Venusian seas that gave them birth. Nothing, however, was found of the first coaster. Then the re-

ports ceased; and a black horror settled upon us who had remained in the ether-ship.

The huge space-vessel was ill-adapted to horizontal flight within atmospheric levels. But we set out anyway, and tried to find the coasters, though we all knew there could no longer be anything to find. I won't detail our trip: we all saw enough to turn our stomachs permanently; and those horrors of immeasurable life were sweet and charming in comparison with some of the things that our searchlights revealed on the dark side of the planet. . . . Anyhow, we gave it up at last, and came back to earth. And I, for one, have been well satisfied to remain on Terra Firma. Others can do the exploring and work the Venusian mines and plantations. I know too well the fate of those lost parties and their vessels. And I know what has happened to the warehouses of neo-manganese steel that have utterly disappeared and have been replaced by a half-grown jungle.

THE INVISIBLE CITY

"CONFOUND you," said Langley in a hoarse whisper that came with effort through swollen lips, blue-black with thirst. "You've gulped about twice your share of the last water in the Lob-nor Desert." He shook the canten which Furnham had just returned to him, and listened with a savage frown to the ominously light gurgling of its contents.

The two surviving members of the Furnham Archaeological Expedition eyed each other with new-born but rapidly growing disfavor. Furnham, the leader, flushed with dark anger beneath his coat of deepening dust and sunburn. The accusation was unjust, for he had merely moistened his parched tongue from Langley's canteen. His own canteen, which he had shared equally with his companion, was now empty.

Up to that moment the two men had been the best of friends. Their months of association in a hopeless search for the ruins of the semi-fabulous city of Kobar had given them abundant reason to respect each other. Their quarrel sprang from nothing else than the mental distortion and morbidity of sheer exhaustion, and the strain of a desperate predicament. Langley, at times, was even growing a trifle light-headed after their long ordeal of wandering on foot through a land without wells, beneath a sun whose flames poured down upon them like molten lead.

"We ought to reach the Tarim River pretty soon," said Furnham stiffly, ignoring the charge and repressing a desire to announce in mordant terms his unfavorable opinion of Langley.

"If we don't, I guess it will be your fault," the other snapped. "There's been a jinx on this expedition from the beginning; and I shouldn't wonder if the jinx were you. It was your idea to hunt for Kobar, anyway. I've never believed there was any such place."

Furnham glowered at his companion, too near the breaking point himself to make due allowance for Langley's nerve-wrought condition, and then turned away, refusing to reply. The two plodded on, ignoring each other with sullen ostentatiousness.

The expedition, consisting of five Americans in the employ of a New York museum, had started from Khotan two months before to investigate the archaeological remains of Eastern Turkestan. Ill-luck had dogged them continually; and the ruins of Kobar, their main objective, said to have been built by the ancient Uighurs, had eluded them like a mirage. They found other ruins, had exhumed a few Greek and Byzantine coins, and a few broken Buddhas, but nothing of much novelty or importance, from a museum viewpoint.

At the very outset, soon after leaving the oasis of Tchertchen, one member of the party had died from gangrene caused by the vicious bite of a Bactrian camel. Later on, a second, seized by a cramp while swimming in the shallow Tarim River, near the reedy marshes of Lob-nor, that strange remnant of a vast inland sea, had drowned before his companions could reach him. A third had died of some mysterious fever. Then, in the desert south of the Tarim, where Furnham and Langley still persisted in a futile effort to locate the lost city, their Mongol guides had deserted them. They took all the camels and most of the provisions, leaving to the two men only their rifles, their canteens, their other personal belongings, the various antique relics they had amassed, and a few tins of food.

The desertion was hard to explain, for the Mongols had heretofore shown themselves reliable enough. However, they had displayed a queer reluctance on the previous day, had seemed unwilling to venture further among the endless undulations of coiling sand and pebbly soil.

Furnham, who knew the language better than Langley, had gathered that they were afraid of something, were deterred by superstitious legends concerning this portion of the Lob-nor Desert. But they had been strangely vague and reticent as to the object of their fear; and Furnham had learned nothing of its actual nature.

Leaving everything but their food, water and rifles to the mercy of

the drifting sands, the men had started northward toward the Tarim, which was sixty or seventy miles away. If they could reach it, they would find shelter in one of the sparse settlements of fisherman along its shores; and could eventually make their way back to civilization.

It was now afternoon of the second day of their wanderings. Langley had suffered most, and he staggered a little as they went on beneath the eternally cloudless heavens, across the glaring desolation of the dreary landscape. His heavy Winchester had become an insufferable burden, and he had thrown it away in spite of the remonstrance of Furnham, who still retained his own weapon.

The sun had lowered a little, but burned with gruelling rays, tyranically torrid, through the bright inferno of stagnant air. There was no wind, except for brief and furious puffs that whirled the light sand in the faces of the men, and then died as suddenly as they had risen. The ground gave back the heat and glare of the heavens in shimmering, blinding waves of refraction.

Langley and Furnham mounted a low, gradual ridge and paused in sweltering exhaustion on its rocky spine. Before them was a broad, shallow valley, at which they stared in a sort of groggy wonderment, puzzled by the level and artificial-looking depression, perfectly square, and perhaps a third of a mile wide, which they descried in its center. The depression was bare and empty with no sign of ruins, but was lined with numerous pits that suggested the ground-plan of a vanished city.

The men blinked, and both were prompted to rub their eyes as they peered through the flickering heat-waves; for each had received a momentary impression of flashing light, broken into myriad spires and columns, that seemed to fill the shallow basin and fade like a mirage.

Still mindful of their quarrel, but animated by the same unspoken thought, they started down the long declivity, heading straight toward the depression. If the place were the site of some ancient city they might possibly hope to find a well or water-spring.

They approached the basin's edge, and were puzzled more and more by its regularity. Certainly it was not the work of nature; and it might have been quarried yesterday, for seemingly there were no ravages of wind and weather in the sheer walls; and the floor was remarkably smooth, except for the multitude of square pits that ran in straight, intersecting lines, like the cellars of destroyed or unbuilt houses. A growing sense of strangeness and mystery troubled the two men; and they

were blinded at intervals by the flash of evanescent light that seemed to overflow the basin with phantom towers and pillars.

They paused within a few feet of the edge, incredulous and bewildered. Each began to wonder if his brain had been affected by the sun. Their sensations were such as might mark the incipience of delirium. Amid the blasts of furnace-like heat, a sort of icy coolness appeared to come upon them from the broad basin. Clammy but refreshing, like the chill that might emanate from walls of sunless stone, it revived their fainting senses and quickened their awareness of unexplained mystery.

The coolness became even more noticeable when they reached the very verge of the precipice. Here, peering over, they saw that the sides fell unbroken at all points for a depth of twenty feet or more. In the smooth bottom, the cellar-like pits yawned darkly and unfathomably. The floor about the pits was free of sand, pebbles or detritus.

"Heavens, what do you make of that?" muttered Furnham to himself rather than to Langley. He stooped over the edge, staring down with feverish and inconclusive speculations. The riddle was beyond his experience—he had met nothing like it in all his researches. His puzzlement, however, was partly submerged in the more pressing problem of how he and Langley were to descend the sheer walls. Thirst—and the hope of finding water in one of the pits—were more important at that moment than the origin and nature of the square basin.

Suddenly, in his stooping position, a kind of giddiness seized him, and the earth seemed to pitch deliriously beneath his feet. He staggered, he lost his balance, and fell forward from the verge.

Half-fainting, he closed his eyes against the hurtling descent and the crash twenty feet below. Instantly, it seemed, he struck bottom. Amazed and incomprehending, he found that he was lying at full length, prone on his stomach in mid-air, upborne by a hard, flat, invisible substance. His outflung hands encountered an obstruction, cool as ice and smooth as marble; and the chill of it smote through his clothing as he lay gazing down into the gulf. Wrenched from his grasp by the fall, his rifle hung beside him.

He heard the startled cry of Langley, and then realized that the latter had seized him by the ankles and was drawing him back to the precipice. He felt the unseen surface slide beneath him, level as a concrete pavement, glib as glass. Then Langley was helping him to his feet. Both, for the nonce, had forgotten their misunderstanding.

"Say, am I bughouse?" cried Langley. "I though you were a goner when you fell. What have we stumbled on, anyhow?"

"Stumbled is good," said Furnham reflectively as he tried to collect himself. "That basin is floored with something solid, but transparent as air—something unknown to geologists or chemists. God knows what it is, or where it came from or who put it there. We've found a mystery that puts Kobar in the shade. I move that we investigate."

He stepped forward, very cautiously, still half-fearful of falling, and stood suspended over the basin.

"If you can do it, I guess I can," said Langley as he followed. With Furnham in the lead, the two began to cross the basin, moving slowly and gingerly along the invisible pavement. The sensation of peering down as if through empty air was indescribably weird.

They had started midway between two rows of the dark pits, which lay fifty feet apart. Somehow, it was like following a street. After they had gone some little distance from the verge, Furnham deviated to the left, with the idea of looking directly down into one of these mysterious pits. Before he could reach a vertical vantage-point, he was arrested by a smooth, solid wall, like that of a building.

"I think we've discovered a city," he announced. Groping his way along the air-clear wall, which seemed free of angles or roughness, he came to an open doorway. It was about five feet wide and of indeterminable height. Fingering the wall like a blind man, he found that it was nearly six inches thick. He and Langley entered the door, still walking on a level pavement, and advanced without obstruction, as if in a large empty room.

For an instant, as they went forward, light seemed to flash above them in great arches and arcades, touched with evanescent colors like those in fountain-spray. Then it vanished, and the sun shone down as before from a void and desert heaven. The coolness emanating from the unknown substance was more pronounced than ever; and the men almost shivered. But they were vastly refreshed, and the torture of their thirst was somewhat mitigated.

Now they could look perpendicularly into the square pit below them in the stone floor of the excavation. They were unable to see its bottom, for it went down into shadow beyond the westering sun-rays. But both could see the bizarre and inexplicable object which appeared to float immobile in air just below the mouth of the pit. They felt a creeping chill

that was more insidious, more penetrant than the iciness of the unseen walls.

"Now I'm seeing things," said Langley.

"Guess I'm seeing them too," added Furnham.

The object was a long, hairless, light-grey body, lying horizontally, as if in some invisible sarcophagus or tomb. Standing erect, it would have been fully seven feet in height. It was vaguely human in its outlines, and possessed two legs and two arms; but the head was quite unearthly. The thing seemed to have a double set of high, concave ears, lined with perforations; and in place of nose, mouth and chin, there was a long, tapering trunk which lay coiled on the bosom of the monstrosity like a serpent. The eyes—or what appeared to be such—were covered by leathery, lashless and hideously wrinkled lids.

The thing lay rigid; and its whole aspect was that of a well-preserved corpse or mummy. Half in light and half in shadow, it hung amid the funereal, fathomless pit; and beneath it, at some little distance, as their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, the men seemed to perceive another and similar body.

Neither could voice the mad, eerie thoughts that assailed them. The mystery was too macabre and overwhelming and impossible. It was Langley who spoke at last.

"Say, do you suppose they are *all* dead?"

Before Furnham could answer, he and Langley heard a thin, shrill, exiguous sound, like the piping of some unearthly flute whose notes were almost beyond human audition. They could not determine its direction; for it seemed to come from one side and then from another as it continued. Its degree of apparent nearness or distance was also variable. It went on ceaselessly and monotonously, thrilling them with an eeriness as of untrod worlds, a terror as of uncharted dimensions. It seemed to fade away in remote ultramundane gulfs; and then, louder and clearer than before, the piping came from the air beside them.

Inexpressibly startled, the two men stared from side to side in an effort to locate the source of the sound. They could find nothing. The air was clear and still about them; and their view of the rocky slopes that rimmed the basin was blurred only by the dancing haze of heat.

The piping ceased, and was followed by a dead, uncanny silence. But Furnham and Langley had the feeling that someone or something was near them—a stealthy presence that lurked and crouched and drew

closer till they could have shrieked aloud with the terror of suspense. They seemed to wait amid the unrealities of delirium and mirage, haunted by some elusive, undeclared horror.

Tensely they peered and listened, but there was no sound or visual ostent. Then Langley cried out, and fell heavily to the unseen floor, borne backward by the onset of a cold and tangible thing, resistless as the launching coils of an anaconda. He lay helpless, unable to move beneath the dead and fluid weight of the unknown incubus, which crushed down his limbs and body and almost benumbed him with an icy chill as of etheric space. Then something touched his throat, very lightly at first, and then with a pressure that deepened intolerably to a stabbing pain, as if he had been pierced by an icicle.

A black faintness swept upon him, and the pain seemed to recede as if the nerves that bore it to his brain were spun like lengthening gossamers across gulfs of anesthesia.

Furnham, in a momentary paralysis, heard the cry of his companion, and saw Langley fall and struggle feebly, to lie inert with closing eyes and whitening face.

Mechanically, without realizing for some moments what had happened, he perceived that Langley's garments were oddly flattened and pressed down beneath an invisible weight. Then, from the hollow of Langley's neck, he saw the spurting of a thin rill of blood, which mounted straight in air for several inches, and vanished in a sort of red mist.

Bizarre, incoherent thoughts arose in Furnham's mind. It was all too incredible, too unreal. His brain must be wandering, it must have given way entirely . . . but something was attacking Langley—an invisible vampire of this invisible city.

He had retained his rifle. Now he stepped forward and stood beside the fallen man. His free hand, groping in the air, encountered a chill, clammy surface, rounded like the back of a stooping body. It numbed his finger-tips even as he touched it. Then something seemed to reach out like an arm and hurl him violently backward.

Reeling and staggering, he managed to retain his balance and returned more cautiously. The blood still rose in a vanishing rill from Langley's throat. Estimating the position of the unseen attacker, Furnham raised his rifle and took careful aim, with the muzzle less than a yard away from its hidden mark.

The gun roared with deafening resonance, and its sound died away in slow echoes, as if repeated by a maze of walls. The blood ceased to rise from Langley's neck, and fell to a natural trickle. There was no sound, no manifestation of any kind from the thing that had assailed him. Furnham stood in doubt, wondering if his shot had taken effect. Perhaps the thing had been frightened away, perhaps it was still close at hand, and might leap upon him at any moment, or return to its prey.

He peered at Langley, who lay white and still. The blood was ceasing to flow from the tiny puncture. He stepped toward him, with the idea of trying to revive him, but was arrested by a strange circumstance. He saw that Langley's face and upper body were blurred by a grey mist that seemed to thicken and assume palpable outlines. It darkened apace, it took on solidity and from; and Furnham beheld the monstrous thing that lay prone between himself and his companion, with part of its fallen bulk still weighing upon Langley. From its inertness, and the bullet-wound in its side, whence oozed a viscid purple fluid, he felt sure that the thing was dead.

The monster was alien to all terrestrial biology—a huge, invertebrate body, formed like an elongated starfish, with the points ending in swollen tentacular limbs. It had a round, shapeless head with the curving, needle-tipped bill of some mammoth insect. It must have come from other planets or dimensions than ours. It was wholly unlike the mummified creature that floated in the pit below, and Furnham felt that it represented an inferior animal-like type. It was evidently composed of an unknown order of organic matter that became visible to human eyes only in death.

His brain was swamped by the mad enigma of it all. What was this place upon which he and Langley had stumbled? Was it an outpost of worlds beyond human knowledge or observation? What was the material of which these buildings had been wrought? Who were their builders? Whence had they come and what had been their purpose? Was the city of recent date or was it, perhaps, a sort of ruin, whose builders lay dead in its vaults—a ruin haunted only by the vampire monster that had assailed Langley?

Shuddering with repulsion at the dead monster, he started to drag the still unconscious man from beneath the loathsome mass. He avoided touching the dark, semi-translucent body, which lapsed forward, quivering like a stiff jelly, when he had pulled his companion away from it.

Like something very trivial and far away, he remembered the absurd quarrel which Langley had picked with him, and remembered his own resentment as part of a doubtful dream, now lost in the extra-human mystery of their surroundings. He bent over his comrade, anxiously, and saw that some of the natural tan was returning to the pale face and that the eyelids were beginning to flutter. The blood had clotted on the tiny wound. Taking Langley's canteen, he poured the last of its contents between the owner's teeth.

In a few moments Langley was able to sit up. Furnham helped him to his feet, and the two began to cross their way from the crystal maze.

They found the doorway; and Furnham, still supporting the other, decided to retrace their course along the weird street by which they had started to cross the basin. They had gone but a few paces when they heard a faint, almost inaudible rustling in the air before them, together with a mysterious grating noise. The rustling seemed to spread and multiply on every hand, as if an invisible crowd were gathering; but the grating soon ceased.

They went on, slowly and cautiously, with a sense of imminent, uncanny peril. Langley was now strong enough to walk without assistance; and Furnham held his cocked rifle ready for instant use. The vague rusting sounds receded, but still encircled them.

Midway between the underlying rows of pits, they moved on toward the desert precipice, keeping side by side. A dozen paces on the cold, solid pavement, and then they stepped into empty air and landed several feet below with a terrific jar, on another hard surface. It must have been the top of a flight of giant stairs; for, losing their balance, they both lurched and fell, and rolled downward along a series of similar surfaces, and lay stunned at the bottom.

Langley had been rendered unconscious by the fall; but Furnham was vaguely aware of several strange, dreamlike phenomena. He heard a faint, ghostly, sibilant rustling, he felt a light and clammy touch upon his face, and smelled an odor of suffocating sweetness, in which he seemed to sink as into an unfathomable sea. The rustling died to a vast and spatial silence; oblivion darkened above him; and he slid swiftly into nothingness.

It was night when Furnham awoke. His first impression was the white dazzle of a full moon shining in his eyes. Then he became aware that the circle of the great orb was oddly distorted and broken, like a

moon in some cubistic painting. All around and above him were bright, crystalline angles, crossing and intermingling—the outlines of a translucent architecture, dome on dome and wall on wall. As he moved his head, showers of ghostly irises—the lunar yellow and green and purple —fell in his eyes from the broken orb and vanished.

He saw that he was lying on a glass-like floor, which caught the light in moving sparkles. Langley, still unconscious, was beside him. Doubtless they were still in the mysterious oubliette down whose invisible stairs they had fallen. Far off, to one side, through a mélange of the transparent partitions, he could see the vague rocks of the Gobi, twisted and refracted in the same manner as the moon.

Why, he wondered, was the city now visible? Was its substance rendered perceptible, in a partial sort of way by some unknown ray which existed in moonlight but not in the direct beams of the sun? Such an explanation sounded altogether too unscientific; but he could not think of any other at the moment.

Rising on his elbow, he saw the glassy outlines of the giant stairs down which he and Langley had plunged. A pale, diaphanous form, like a phantom of the mummified creature they had seen in the pit, was descending the stairs. It moved forward with fleet strides, longer than those of a man, and stooped above Furnham with its spectral trunk waving inquisitively and poising an inch or two from his face. Two round, phosphorescent eyes emitting perceptible beams like lanterns, glowed solemnly in its head above the beginning of the proboscis.

The eyes seemed to transfix Furnham with their unearthly gaze. He felt that the light they emitted as flowing in a ceaseless stream into his own eyes—into his very brain. The light seemed to shape itself into images, formless and incomprehensible at first, but growing clearer and more coherent momently. Then, in some indescribable way, the images were associated with articulate words, as if a voice were speaking: words that he understood as one might understand the language of dreams.

"We mean you no harm," the voice seemed to say. "But you have stumbled upon our city; and we cannot afford to let you escape. We do not wish to have our presence known to men.

"We have dwelt here for many ages. The Lob-nor desert was a fertile realm when we first established our city. We came to your world as fugitives from a great planet that once formed part of the solar system—a

planet composed entirely of ultra-violet substances, which was destroyed in a terrible cataclysm. Knowing the imminence of the catastrophe, some of us were able to build a huge space-flier, in which we fled to the Earth. From the materials of the flier, and other materials we had brought along for the express purpose, we built our city, whose name, as well as it can be conveyed in human phonetics, is Ciis.

"The things of your world have always been plainly visible to us; and, in fact, due to our immense scale of perceptions, we probably see much that is not manifest to you. Also, we have no need of artificial light at any time. We discovered, however, at an early date, that we ourselves and our building were invisible to men. Strangely enough, our bodies undergo in death a degeneration of substance which brings them within the infra-violet range; and thus within the scope of your visual cognition."

The voice seemed to pause, and Furnham realized that it had spoken only in his thought by a sort of telepathy. In his own mind, he tried to shape a question:

"What do you intend to do with us?"

Again he heard the still, toneless voice:

"We plan to keep you with us permanently. After you fell through the trap-door we had opened, we overpowered you with an anesthetic; and during your period of unconsciousness, which lasted many hours, we injected into your bodies a drug which has already affected your vision, rendering visible, to a certain degree, the ultra-violet substances that surround you. Repeated injections, which must be given slowly, will make these substances no less plain and solid to you than the materials of your own world. Also, there are other processes to which we intend to subject you . . . processes that will serve to adjust and acclimate you in all ways to your new surroundings.

Behind Furnham's weird interlocutor, several more fantasmal figures had descended the half-visible steps. One of them was stooping over Langley, who had begun to stir and would recover full consciousness in a few instants. Furnham sought to frame other questions, and received an immediate reply.

"The creature that attacked your companion was a domestic animal. We were busy in our laboratories at the time, and did not know of your presence till we heard the rifle shots.

"The flashes of light which you saw among our invisible walls on

your arrival were due to some queer phenomenon of refraction. At certain angles the sunlight was broken or intensified by the molecular arrangement of the unseen substance."

At this juncture Langley sat up, looking about him in a bewildered fashion.

"What the hell is all this, and where the hell are we?" he inquired as he peered from Furnham to the people of the city.

Furnham proceeded to explain, repeating the telepathic information he had just received. By the time he had ceased speaking, Langley himself appeared to become the recipient of some sort of mental reassurance from the phantom-like creature who had been Furnham's interlocutor; for Langley stared at this being with a mixture of enlightenment and wonder in his expression.

Once more there came the still, super-auditory voice, fraught now with imperious command.

"Come with us. Your initiation into our life is to begin immediately. My name is Aispha—if you wish to have a name for me in your thoughts. We ourselves, communicating with each other without language, have little need for names; and their use is a rare formality among us. Our generic name, as a people, is the Tiisins."

Furnham and Langley arose with an unquestioning alacrity, for which afterwards they could hardly account, and followed Aispha. It was as if a mesmeric compulsion had been laid upon them. Furnham noted, in an automatic sort of way, as they left the oubliette, that his rifle had vanished. No doubt it had been carefully removed during his period of insensibility.

He and Langley climbed the high steps with some difficulty. Queerly enough, considering their late fall, they found themselves quite free of stiffness and bruises; but at the time they felt no surprise—only a drugged acquiescence in all the marvels and perplexities of their situation.

They found themselves on the outer pavement, amid the bewildering outlines of the luminous buildings which towered above them with intersections of multiform crystalline curves and angles. Aispha went on without pause, leading them toward the fantastic serpentine arch of an open doorway in one of the tallest of these edifices, whose pale domes and pinnacles were heaped in immaterial splendor athwart the zenith-nearing moon.

Four of the ultra-violet people—the companions of Aispha—brought up the rear. Aispha was apparently unarmed; but the others carried weapons like heavy-bladed and blunt-pointed sickles of glass or crystal. Many others of this incredible race, intent on their own enigmatic affairs, were passing to and fro in the open street and through the portals of the unearthly buildings. The city was a place of silent and fantasmal activity.

At the end of the street they were following, before they passed through the arched entrance, Furnham and Langley saw the rock-strewn slope of the Lob-nor, which seemed to have taken on a queer filminess and insubstantiality in the moonlight. It occurred to Furnham, with a sort of weird shock, that his visual perception of earthly objects, as well as of the ultra-violet city, was being affected by the injections of which Aispha told him.

The building they now entered was full of apparatuses made in the form of distorted spheres and irregular disks and cubes, some of which seemed to change their outlines from moment to moment in a confusing manner. Certain of them appeared to concentrate the moonlight like ultra-powerful lenses, turning it to a fiery, blinding brilliance. Neither Furnham nor Langley could imagine the purpose of these devices; and no telepathic explanation was vouchsafed by Aispha or any of his companions.

As they went on into the building there was a queer sense of some importunate and subtle vibration in the air, which affected the men unpleasantly. They could not assign its source nor could they be sure whether their own perception of it was purely mental or came through the avenues of one or more of the physical senses. Somehow it was both disturbing and narcotic; and they sought instinctively to resist its influence.

The lower story of the edifice was seemingly one vast room. The strange apparatuses grew taller about them, rising as if in concentric tiers as they went on. In the huge dome above them, living rays of mysterious light appeared to cross and re-cross at all angles of incidence, weaving a bright, ever-changing web that dazzled the eye.

They emerged in a clear, circular space at the center of the building. Here ten or twelve of the ultra-violet people were standing about a slim column, perhaps five feet high, that culminated in a shallow basin-like formation. There was a glowing oval-shaped object in the basin, large

as the egg of some extinct bird. From this object, numerous spokes of light extended horizontally in all directions, seeming to transfix the heads and bodies of those who stood in a loose ring about the column. Furnham and Langley became aware of a high, thin, humming noise which emanated from the glowing egg and was somehow inseparable from the spokes of light, as if the radiance had become audible.

Aispha paused facing the men; and a voice spoke in their minds.

"The glowing object is called the Doir. An explanation of its real nature and origin would be beyond your present comprehension. It is allied, however, to that range of substances which you would classify as minerals; and is one of a number of similar objects which existed in our former world. It generates a mighty force which is intimately connected with our life-principle; and the rays emanating from it serve us in place of food. If the Doir were lost or destroyed, the consequences would be serious; and our life-term, which normally is many thousand years, would be shortened for want of the nourishing and revivifying rays."

Fascinated, Furnham and Langley stared at the egg-shaped orb. The humming seemed to grow louder; and the spokes of light lengthened and increased in number. The men recognized it now as the source of the vibration that had troubled and oppressed them. The effect was insidious, heavy, hypnotic, as if there were a living brain in the object that sought to overcome their volition and subvert their senses and their minds in some unnatural thralldom.

They heard the mental command of Aispha:

"Go forward and join those who partake of the luminous emanations of the Doir. We believe that by so doing you will, in course of time, become purged of your terrestrial grossness; that the very substance of your bodies may eventually be transformed into something not unlike that of our own; and your senses raised to a perceptional power such as we possess."

Half unwillingly, with an eerie consciousness of compulsion, the men started forward.

"I don't like this," said Furnham in a whisper to Langley. "I'm beginning to feel queer enough already." Summoning his utmost will power he stopped short of the emanating rays and put out his hand to arrest Langley.

With dazzled eyes, they stood peering at the Doir. A cold, restless fire, alive with some nameless evil that was not akin to the evil of Earth, pulsated in its heart; and the long, sharp beams, quivering

slightly, passed like javelins into the semi-crystalline bodies of the beings who stood immobile around the column.

"Hasten!" came the unvocal admonition of Aispha. "In a few moments the force in the Doir, which has a regular rhythm of ebb and flow, will begin to draw back upon itself. The rays will be retracted; and you will have to wait for many minutes before the return of the emanation."

A quick, daring thought had occurred to Furnham. Eyeing the Doir closely, he had been impressed by its seeming fragility. The thing was evidently not attached to the basin in which it reposed; and in all likelihood it would shatter like glass if hurled or even dropped on the floor. He tried to suppress his thought, fearing that it would be read by Aispha or others of the ultra-violet people. At the same time, he sought to phrase, as innocently as possible a mental question:

"What would happen if the Doir were broken?"

Instantly he received an impression of anger, turmoil and consternation in the mind of Aispha. His question, however, was apparently not answered; and it seemed that Aispha did not want to answer it—that he was concealing something too dangerous and dreadful to be revealed. Furnham felt, too, that Aispha was suspicious, had received an inkling of his own repressed thought.

It occurred to him that he must act quickly if at all. Nerving himself, he leaped forward through the ring of bodies about the Doir. The rays had already begun to shorten slightly; but he had the feeling of one who hurls himself upon an array of lance-points. There was an odd, indescribable sensation, as if he were being pierced by something that was both hot and cold; but neither the warmth nor the chill was beyond endurance. A moment, and he stood beside the column, lifting the glowing egg in his hands and poising it defiantly as he turned to face the ultra-violet people.

The thing was phenomenally light; and it seemed to burn his fingers and to freeze them at the same time. He felt a strange vertigo, an indescribable confusion; but he succeeded in mastering it. The contact of the Doir might be deadlier to the human tissues than that of radium for aught he knew. He would have to take his chances. At any rate it would not kill him immediately; and if he played his cards with sufficient boldness and skill, he could make possible the escape of Langley—if not his own escape.

The ring of ultra-violet beings stood as if stupefied by his audacity.

The retracting spokes of light were slowly drawing back into the egg; but Furnham himself was still impaled by them. His fingers seemed to be growing translucent where they clutched the weird ball.

He met the phosphoric gaze of Aispha, and heard the frantic thoughts that were pouring into his mind, not only from Aispha but from all the partakers of the Doir's luminous beams. Dread, unhuman threats, desperate injunctions to return the Doir to its pedestal, were being laid upon him. Rallying all his will, he defied them.

"Let us go free," he said mentally addressing Aispha. "Give me back my weapon and permit my companion and me to leave your city. We wish you no harm; but we cannot allow you to detain us. Let us go—or I will shatter the Doir—will smash it like an egg on the floor."

At the shaping of his destructive thought, a shudder passed among the semi-spectral beings; and he felt the dire fear that his threat had aroused in them. He had been right: the Doir *was* fragile; and some awful catastrophe, whose nature he could not quite determine, would ensue instantly upon its shattering.

Step by step, glancing frequently about to see that no one approached him by stealth from behind, Furnham returned to Langley's side. The Tiisins drew back from him in evident terror. All the while he continued to issue his demands and comminations:

"Bring the rifle quickly . . . the weapon you took from me . . . and give it into my companion's hands. Let us go without hindrance or molestation—or I will drop the Doir. When we are outside the city, one of you—one only—shall be permitted to approach us, and I will deliver the Doir to him."

One of the Tiisins left the group to return in less than a minute with Furnham's Winchester. He handed it to Langley, who inspected the weapon carefully and found that it had not been damaged or its loading or mechanism tampered with in any way. Then, with the ultra-violet creatures following them in manifest perturbation, Furnham and Langley made their way from the building and started along the open street in the general direction (as Langley estimated from the compass he carried) of the Tarim River.

They went on amid the fantastic towering of the crystalline piles; and the people of the city, called as if by some unworded summons, poured from the doorways in an ever-swelling throng and gathered behind them. There was no active demonstration of any overt kind; but both

the men were increasingly aware of the rage and consternation that had been aroused by Furnham's audacious theft of the Doir—a theft that seemed to be regarded in the light of actual blasphemy.

The hatred of the Tiisins, like a material radiation—dark, sullen, stupefying, stultifying, beat upon them at every step. It seemed to clog their brains and their feet like some viscid medium of nightmare; and their progression toward the Gobi slope became painfully slow and tedious.

Before them, from one of the buildings, a tenacled, starfish monster, like the thing that had assailed Langley, emerged and lay crouching in the street as if to dispute their passage. Raising its evil beak, it glared with filmy eyes, but slunk away from their approach as if at the monition of its owners.

Furnham and Langley, passing it with involuntary shivers of repugnance, went on. The air was oppressed with alien, unformulable menace. They felt an abnormal drowsiness creeping upon them. There was an unheard, narcotic music, which sought to overcome their vigilance, to beguile them into slumber.

Furnham's fingers grew numb with the unknown radiations of the Doir, though the sharp beams of light, by accelerative degrees, had withdrawn into its center, leaving only a formless misty glow that filled the weird orb. The thing seemed latent with terrible life and power. The bones of his transparent hand were outlined against it like those of a skeleton.

Looking back, he saw that Aispha followed closely, walking in advance of the other Tiisins. He could not read the thoughts of Aispha as formerly. It was as if a blank, dark wall had been built up. Somehow he had a premonition of evil—of danger and treachery in some form which he could not understand or imagine.

He and Langley came to the end of the street, where the ultra-violet pavement joined itself to the desert acclivity. As they began their ascent of the slope both men realized that their visual powers had indeed been affected by the injecture treatment of the Tiisins; for the soil seemed to glow beneath them, faintly translucent; and the boulders were like semi-crystalline masses, whose inner structure they could see dimly.

Aispha followed them on the slope; but the other people of Ciis, as had been stipulated by Furnham, paused at the juncture of their streets and buildings with the infra-violet substances of Earth.

After they had gone perhaps fifty yards on the gentle acclivity, Furnham came to a pause and waited for Aispha, holding out the Doir at arm's length. Somehow he had a feeling that it was unwise to return the mystic egg; but he would keep his promise, since the people of Ciis had kept their part of the bargain so far.

Aispha took the Doir from Furnham's hands; but his thoughts whatever they were remained carefully shrouded. There was a sense of something ominous and sinister about him as he turned and went back down the slope with the fiery egg shining through his body like a great watchful eye. The beams of light were beginning to emanate from its center once more.

The two men, looking back ever and anon, resumed their journey. Ciis glimmered below them like the city of a mirage in the moonlit hollow. They saw the ultra-violet people crowding to await Aispha at the end of their streets.

Then, as Aispha neared his fellows two rays of cold, writhing fire leaped forth from the base of a tower that glittered like glass at the city's verge. Clinging to the ground, the rays ran up the slope with the undulant motion of pythons, following Langley and Furnham at a speed that would soon overtake them.

"They're doublecrossing us!" warned Furnham. He caught the Winchester from Langley, dropped to his knees and aimed carefully, drawing a bead on the luminous orb of the Doir through the spectral form of Aispha, who had now reached the city and was about to enter the waiting throng.

"Run!" he called to Langley. "I'll make them pay for their treachery; and perhaps you can get away in the meanwhile."

He pulled the trigger, missing Aispha but dropping at least two of the Tiisins who stood near the Doir. Again, steadily, he drew bead, while the rays from the tower serpentined onward, pale, chill and deadly-looking, till they were almost at his feet. Even as he aimed, Aispha took refuge in the foremost ranks of the crowd, through whose filmy bodies the Doir still glowed.

This time the high-powered bullet found its mark, though it must have passed through more than one of the ultra-violet beings before reaching Aispha and the mystic orb.

Furnham had hardly known what the result would be, but he felt sure that some sort of catastrophe would ensue the destruction of the

Doir. What really happened was incalculable and almost beyond description.

Before the Doir could fall from the hands of its stricken bearer, it seemed to expand in a rushing wheel of intense light, revolving as it grew, and blotting out the form of the ultra-violet people in the foreground. With awful velocity, the wheel struck the nearer buildings, which appeared to soar and vanish like towers of fading mirage. There was no audible explosion—no sound of any kind—only that silent, ever-spinning, ever-widening disk of light that threatened to involve by swift degrees the whole extent of Ciis.

Gazing spellbound, Furnham had almost forgotten the serpentine rays. Too late he saw that one of them was upon him. He leaped back, but the thing caught him, coiling about his limbs and body like an anaconda. There was a sensation of icy cold, of horrible constriction; and then, helpless, he found that the strange beam of force was dragging him back down the slope toward Ciis, while its fellow went on in pursuit of the fleeing Langley.

In the meanwhile the spreading disk of fire had reached the tower from which the ray emanated. Suddenly, Furnham was free—the serpentine beams had both vanished. He stood rooted to the spot in speechless awe; and Langley, returning down the hill, also paused watching the mighty circle of light that seemed to fill the entire basin at their feet with a soundless vortex of destruction.

"My God!" cried Furnham after a brief interval. "Look what's happening to the slope."

As if the force of the uncanny explosion were now extending beyond Ciis, boulders and masses of earth began to rise in air before the white, glowing maelstrom, and sailed in slow, silent levitation toward the men.

Furnham and Langley started to run, stumbling up the slope, and were overtaken by something that lifted them softly, buoyantly, irresistibly, with a strange feeling of utter weightlessness, and bore them like wind-wafted leaves or feathers through the air. They saw the bouldered crest of the acclivity flowing far beneath them; and then they were floating, floating, ever higher in the moonlight, above leagues of dim desert. A faintness came upon them both—a vague nausea—an illimitable vertigo; and slowly, somewhere in that incredible flight, they lapsed into unconsciousness.

The moon had fallen low, and its rays were almost horizontal in

Furnham's eyes when he awoke. An utter confusion possessed him at first; and his circumstances were more than bewildering. He was lying on a sandy slope, among scattered shrubs, meager and stunted; and Langley was reclining not far away. Raising himself a little, he saw the white and reed-fringed surface of a river—which could be no other than the Tarim—at the slope's bottom. Half incredulous, he realized that the force of the weird explosion had carried Langley and himself many miles and had deposited them, apparently unhurt, beside the goal of their desert wanderings!

Furnham rose to his feet, feeling a queer lightness and unsteadiness. He took a tentative step—and landed four or five feet away. It was as if he had lost half his normal weight. Moving with great care he went over to Langley, who had now started to sit up. He was reassured to find that his eye-sight was becoming normal again; for he perceived merely a faint glowing in the objects about him. The sand and boulders were comfortably solid; and his own hands were no longer translucent.

"Gosh!" he said to Langley, "That was some explosion. The force that was liberated by the shattering of the Doir must have done something to the gravity of all surrounding objects. I guess the city of Ciis and its people must have gone back into outer space; and even the infra-violet substances about the city must have been more or less degravitated. But I guess the effect is wearing off as far as you and I are concerned—otherwise we'd be traveling still."

Langley got up and tried to walk, with the same disconcerting result that had characterized Furnham's attempt. He mastered his limbs and his equilibrium after a few experiments.

"I still feel like a sort of dirigible," he commented. "Say, I think we'd better leave this out of our report to the museum. A city, a people, all invisible, in the heart of the Lob-nor—that would be too much for scientific credibility."

"I agree with you," said Furnham, "the whole business would be too fantastic, outside of a super-scientific story. In fact," he added a little maliciously, "it's even more incredible than the existence of the ruins of Kobar."

THE DIMENSION OF CHANCE

"BETTER get that pea-shooter ready," warned Markley through the audiphone, from his seat at the controls of the rocket plane. "At this rate we'll come within range in a few minutes. Those Japs are good gunners, and they'll have a red-hot welcome for us."

Clement Morris, Secret Service operative, and college chum of Andrew Markley, his pilot, in a swift and dangerous chase, inspected the cartridge-belt of the new and incredibly rapid-firing gun, behind which he sat in lieu of the official gunner. Then he resumed his watching of the bright metallic speck that they followed in the thin, dark, stirless air of the stratosphere, twelve miles above the eastward-flowing blur that was Nevada.

They were beginning to overhaul the Japanese plane that had picked up the fleeing spy, Isho Sakamoto, near Ogden. Morris had been tracking down this preternaturally clever spy for months, under Government orders. Sakamoto was believed to have procured plans of many American fortifications, as well as information regarding projected army movements in the war against the Sino-Japanese Federation that had begun a year ago, in 1975.

The enemy rocket plane, descending unexpectedly, had rescued Sakamoto at the very moment when Morris was about to corner him; and Morris had immediately commandeered the services of his old friend Markley of the Air Corps, then stationed at Ogden.

Markley's rocket plane was said to be one of the swiftest in the entire Corps. In its air-tight hull, with oxygen-tanks, helmets and parachutes already donned in case of accident, the two men were speeding onward

at an acceleration so terrific that it held them in their seats as if with leaden strait-jackets. Morris, however, was little less accustomed to such flights than Markley himself; and it was not the first time that they had hunted down some national foe or traitor in company.

They drove on between the dark-blue heavens and the dim Earth with its mottlings of mountains and desert. The roar of the rockets was strangely thin in that rarefied air. Before them the light of the stark sun, falling westward, glittered on the wings and hull of the Japanese as if on some great silver beetle. They were many miles from the usual lanes of stratosphere traffic; and no other vessels rode the windless gulf through which pursued and pursuer plunged toward the Sierras and the far Pacific.

Less than a mile now intervened betwixt the two vessels. There was no sign of overt hostility from the Japanese, which carried a heavy machine-gun equal in range to that of the American ship, and was manned by a professional gunner as well as by Sakamoto and the pilot. Morris began to calculate the range carefully. It would be a fair fight; and he thrilled at the prospect. The spy, at all costs, must not be permitted to reach San Francisco, where the enemy had established a hard-won base. If the fight should go against them, he or Markley, as a last resort, would summon other planes by radio from one of the American bases in California, to intercept Sakamoto.

Far off, through the inconceivably clear air, on the enormously extended horizon, he could see the faint notching of the California mountains. Then, as the planes hurtled on, it seemed to him that a vague, misty blur, such as might appear in sun-dazzled eyes, had suddenly developed in mid-air beyond the Japanese. The blur baffled him, like an atmospheric blind spot, having neither form nor hue nor delimitable outlines. But it seemed to enlarge rapidly and to blot out the map-like scene beyond in an inexplicable manner.

Markley had also perceived the blur.

"That's funny," he roared through the audiphone. "Anything in the shape of mist or cloud would be altogether impossible at this height. Must be some queer kind of atmosphere phenomenon—the mirage of a remote cloud, perhaps, transferred to the isothermal layer. But I can't make it out."

Morris did not answer. Amazement checked the somewhat inconsequential remark that rose to his lips; for at that moment the Japanese

rocket plane appeared to enter the mysterious blur, vanishing immediately from vision as if in actual cloud or fog. There was a quick, tremulous gleaming of its hull and wings, as if it had started to fall or had abruptly changed its course—and then it was gone, beyond the hueless and shapeless veil.

"That's funnier still," commented Markley, in a puzzled voice. "But they can't shake us by flying into any damned mirage or what-you-call-it. We'll soon pick them up on the other side."

Diving horizontally ahead at six hundred miles per hour, the vessel neared the strange blur, which had now blotted out a huge section of the sky and world. It was like a sort of blindness spreading on the upper air; but it did not convey the idea of darkness or of anything material or tangible.

Both Morris and Markley, as they neared it, felt that they were peering with strained, eluded eyes at something that was virtually beyond the scope of human vision. They seemed to grope for some ungraspable image—an unearthly shadow that fled from sight—a thing that was neither dark nor light nor colored with any known hue.

An instant more, and the blur devoured the heavens with terrible momentum. Then, as the plane rushed into it, a blindness fell on the two men, and they could no longer discern the vessel's interior or its ports. Ineffable greyness, like an atmosphere of cotton-wool, enveloped them and seemed to intercept all visual images.

The roar of the rockets had ceased at the same time, and they could hear nothing. Markley tried to speak, but the oath of astonishment died unuttered in his throat as if before a barrier of infrangible silence. It was as if they had entered some unfamiliar medium, neither air nor ether, that was wholly void and negative, and which refused to carry the vibrations of light, color, and sound.

They had lost the sense of movement, too, and could not know if they were flying or falling or were suspended immovably in the weird vacuum. Nothing seemed able to touch or reach them; the very sense of time was gone; and their thoughts crawled sluggishly, with a dull confusion, a dreamy surprise, in the all-including void. It was like the preliminary effect of an anaesthetic: a timeless, bodiless, weightless hovering in the gulf that borders upon oblivion.

Very suddenly, like the lifting of a curtain, the blindness cleared away. In a strange, flickering, brownish-red light the men saw the inte-

rior of the hull, and beheld each other's goggled helmets and leatheroid air-suits. They became aware that the vessel was falling gently and obliquely, with slanted floor. The rocket explosions had wholly ceased, though Markley had not touched the controlling lever. He could not start them again, and the entire mechanism refused any longer to obey his control. Through the ports, he and Morris saw a multi-colored chaos of outlandish and incomprehensible forms, into which the plane was descending slowly, with incredible lightness, like a downward-floating leaf or feather.

"I don't know what has happened, or where we are," said Markley. "But I guess we might as well sit tight. There's no need to jump—we couldn't go down any more safely with parachutes. But what the hell have we gotten into, anyway?"

"Can't say," rejoined his companion, equally dumbfounded and at a loss. "Whatever or wherever the place is, it's not the state of Nevada."

Their descent toward the unknown, mysterious terrain seemed to occupy many minutes, and once or twice the vessel hung motionless for a moment, and then resumed its gliding with a jerk. Staring from the ports in ever-growing bewilderment, they began to distinguish separate forms and masses in the queer chaos of scenery. Irregular hills, mottled with grey, green, ocher and violet-black, lifted about them in the rufous light, and they perceived that they were settling into a kind of valley-bottom. The ground beneath them was partly bare, partly covered with objects that resembled vegetable growths rather than anything else. These plants, or plant-like things, as the plane settled closer above them, displayed a remarkable diversity of shape, size and hue, ranging from leafless, limbless stems to great tree-forms, with a crowded foliation that suggested some impossible crossing of araucaria and banana. The whole impression of this flora, even at that first glimpse, was one of lawless variety and illimitable grotesquery.

The vessel slanted slowly down on an open, level tract, narrowly missing the tops of some of the taller growths. It landed with a light jar, little more pronounced than if it had been checked by the usual process of careful deceleration. Markley and Morris peered out on a scene that amazed them more and more as they began to perceive its innumerable oddities of detail. For the nonce, they forgot the Japanese rocket plane they had been following, and did not even speculate regarding its fate or whereabouts.

"Jumping Christopher!" cried Markley. "Mother Nature certainly was inventive when she designed this place. Look at those plants—no two of them alike. And the soil would give a geologist a nightmare." He was now peering at the ground about the vessel, which offered a remarkable mosaic of numberless elements—a conglomeration of parti-colored soils, ores, and mineral forms, wholly unstratified and chaotic.

It was mostly bare, and broken into uneven mounds and hummocks; but here and there, in patches of poisonous-looking clay or marl, peculiar grasses grew, with blades that varied in the same manner as the larger growths, so that one might well have imagined that each blade belonged to a separate genus.

Not far away was a clump of trees, exhibiting monstrous variations in their leafage, even when there was a vague likeness of bole or branch. It seemed as if the laws of type had been disowned, as if each individual plant were a species in itself.

A stream of some water-like fluid, varying strangely from peacock blue to cloudy amber in its course, ran past the fallen plane and meandered through the valley toward a barren slope at one end, from which another stream appeared to descend and join it, flowing in a series of rapids and low cascades from a hill-top that melted indistinctly into the reddish-brown heavens.

"Well," observed Markley, after contemplating this *milieu* with a quizzical and slightly troubled frown, "the problem of how we got here is equalled in its abstruseness only by the problem of how we are going to get away. Somehow or other, we have fallen into a foreign world and are now subject to unfamiliar physical laws. Our nitrone fuel simply won't explode—there's something—hell knows what—that prevents combustion."

"Sure the tubes are all right?" queried Morris. "Maybe we've run short of fuel."

"Huh!" the tone was superbly contemptuous. "I know this boat. There's nothing the matter with the rocket mechanism. And I loaded up to the limit with nitrone before we started. We could have chased Sakamoto to the Great Wall of China and back again, if necessary, without re-fueling. I tell you, we're up against something that was omitted from the text-books. Just look at this ungodly hole, anyway. It's like the scrambled hallucinations of a hundred cases of delirium tremens."

"I've monkeyed with hashish and peyote beans in my time," said Mor-

ris, "but I'll admit that I never saw anything like this. However, we're probably missing a lot by staying in the ship. What do you say to a little promenade? Sakamoto and his friends may be somewhere in the neighborhood, too; and if they are, I'd like to get a line on them."

Very cautiously, the two men unstrapped themselves from their seats and arose. In spite of their heavy garments, they felt a queer physical lightness that argued a lesser gravitation than that of Earth, and which no doubt accounted for the leisurely fall of the plane. They almost seemed to float around the hull; and found great difficulty in controlling and calculating their movement.

They had brought along a few sandwiches and a thermos bottle of coffee. These, their sole provisions, they decided to leave in the plane. Both carried automatic pistols of a new type, firing fifteen shots with terrifically high-powered ammunition, and having almost the range of rifles. Making sure that these pistols were ready in their holsters, which formed part of the leatheroid garments, and re-testing their oxygen-tanks and helmets, the men opened the sealed door of the hull by means of a spring apparatus, and emerged.

The air of the valley, as far as they could tell, was still and windless. It seemed to be quite warm, and they were forced to shut off the heating mechanism in their suits, which they had turned on against the zero of the stratosphere. Almost vertically overhead, a heavy and lop-sided sun glared down, pouring on its light like a visible flood of reddish-brown liquid. A few clouds, with unearthly forms, floated idly about the sun; and far off in the lower heavens, above dim slopes and crags, other clouds went racing as if driven by a mad tempest.

Trying to determine the course of their descent into the valley, Morris and Markley perceived an aerial blur at one point in the heavens—a blur similar to, and perhaps identical with the one into which they had flown above Nevada. This blur, it occurred to Markley, was perhaps formed by the meeting or overlapping of two different kinds of space, and was the entrance between their own world and the alien dimension into which they had been precipitated. It was visible in the reddish air like the "ropiness" or cloudy nucleus that sometimes appears in a clear wine.

"Which way shall we go?" queried Markley, as he and Morris surveyed the valley on all sides, perceiving much that they had not seen from the plane. At the end that had been previously hidden, the vari-

colored stream emerged from a narrowing defile of madly-tilted cliffs and pinnacles, hued as with petrified rainbows. On both sides of the valley were long, irregular slopes and barren bluffs, looming vaguely above areas of fantastic forestation. One of these areas, lying on the right hand, approached in a sort of arc to within a hundred yards of the rocket plane.

"I move that we head for the nearest timber," said Morris, indicating this mass of grotesquely varied growths. "I have a feeling, somehow, that I'd like to get under cover as quickly as possible. There's no telling, of course, but I have an intuition that Sakamoto and his compatriots are somewhere in the vicinity."

"Their visibility is pretty poor, if they are," commented Markley. "We may have lost them altogether—maybe they got safely through that atmospheric blind spot, or fell into another and remote section of this ungodly world."

"Well, I'm not taking any more chances than I have to. I don't care for the idea of a soft-nosed Japanese bullet in the back."

"If rocket fuel won't explode in this world, there's no certainty that cartridges will either," Markley pointed out. "But anyway, we might as well take a look at the woods."

They started off toward the forest, trying to control the absurd lightness that sent them bounding for twenty feet or more. After a few paces, however, they found that their weight was increasing rapidly, as if they had entered a zone of stronger gravitation. They took one or two steps that were almost normal—and then floated off in ludicrous leaps of a dozen yards that were checked suddenly as if by another belt of increased gravity.

The trees, which had seemed so near, retreated in a strange and disconcerting fashion. At length, after many minutes of variable progression, the men saw the wood looming immediately before them, and could study its details. High in the heavens, above all the other growths, there towered two incredibly elongated boles such as might be seen in the delirium of hashish; and about them a medley of lesser forms, no two of which displayed the same habit, leaned and crawled and squatted or massed themselves in monstrous tangles.

There were single plants that combined enormous moon-shaped leaves with others that were fern-like or lanceolate. Gourd-like fruits grew on the same tree with others in the form of tiny plums and huge

melons. Everywhere there were flowers that made the most ornate terrestrial orchids appear simple and rudimentary as daisies in comparison.

All was irregular and freakish, testifying to a haphazard law of development. It seemed that this whole chaotic cosmos in which the men found themselves had been shaped from atoms and electrons that had formed no fixed patterns of behavior, and whose one controlling law was chance. Nothing, apparently, was duplicated; the very stones and minerals were anomalous. What further irregularities they would encounter, Morris and Markley could not guess. In a world subject to chance, everything would be incalculable; and the action of the simplest natural laws would be wholly erratic and undependable. A horror of this lawless world gradually arose in them.

So far, they had met nothing in the form of animal life. Now, as they neared the forest, a creature that was like a poddy and spider-legged serpent came down as if from the heavens on one of the preposterously tall boles, running swiftly. The men stepped toward the tree, trying to decide which end of this curious creature was the head and which the tail.

Astoundingly, like a mirage, the forest faded away with their change of position; and they saw its fantastic tops at a seeming distance of many hundred yards, in an oblique direction. Turning, they found that the whole valley, during their brief journey, had shifted about and had re-composed itself beyond all recognition. They were unable to locate the rocket plane for some moments; but finally, in an opposite quarter, and seemingly much further away than they had supposed, they discerned the gleaming of its wings and hull.

Before them, in lieu of the forest, was an open space in which the vari-colored stream had mysteriously reappeared. Beyond the stream arose plots of scattered vegetation, backed by opalescent cliffs.

"The late Professor Einstein would have been interested in this," remarked Morris. "Even the light must be moving at random, and sight images are traveling in zigzags and circles. Nothing is where it ought to be. We've gotten into a labyrinth of mirages."

"We'll be lucky if we ever find our way back to the old boat," snorted Markley. "Want to look any further for our Japanese friends?"

Morris did not answer at once. His eye had caught a silvery glint, close to one of the far-off plots of vegetation beyond the stream. He pointed it out to his companion silently. Three dark, moving specks,

doubtless the figures of men, appeared beside the glint as they watched.

"There they are," said Morris. "Looks as if they were starting for a *pasear* themselves, or were just returning from one. Shall we try to interview them?"

"You're the captain, old scout. I'm game if you are. Lead on, MacDuff."

Temporarily forgetting the highly illusive refraction of the weird scenery, they started toward the stream, which appeared to be only a few paces away, and which they could easily cross at a step if the light gravity prevailed in its neighborhood. By another astonishing shift, the stream moved away from them, reappearing in a different quarter, at a considerable distance; and the gleam of the Japanese rocket plane and its attendant human specks had vanished from view.

"I guess we'll play tag with some more mirages," opined Markley in a disgusted tone. "Even if guns will shoot in this crazy world, there's small likelihood that we could hit anyone, or that anyone could hit us."

More deeply bewildered and bemused than ever, they pressed forward, trying to re-locate the enemy vessel. The changing zones of gravity made their progress erratic and uncertain; and the landscape melted and shifted around them like the imagery of a kaleidoscope.

A clump of crowded vegetation, rearing its anomalous boles and monstrous leafage as if from nowhere, leaped into place before them. Rounding the clump, which seemed relatively stable, they came suddenly in sight of the Japanese, who, in air-suits and helmets, were now standing on the opposite brink of the apparently nearby water.

Whether or not Sakamoto and his fellows had seen the Americans was uncertain. They were staring in the direction of Morris and Markley, who did not wait for decisive proof that the enemy had perceived them, but drew their automatics and aimed quickly, each choosing one of the two nearest figures.

Somewhat to their surprise, in view of the various baffling and topsy-turvey phenomena they had encountered, the pressure of the triggers was followed by a sharp double report. The Japanese, however, did not seem to realize that they were being fired at; and their apparent nearness and relative position were no doubt illusory.

Markley and Morris, recognizing the probability of this, did not shoot again, but sprang forward in an effort to approach the deceptive figures. The Japanese vanished; the whole valley seemed to swirl in a

semi-circle and rearrange itself; and the two Americans found themselves at the foot of that barren slope from which, in their first remote view of the place, a second stream had appeared to descend and join the meandering creek.

From their new and close vantage, however, there was only one stream, which, flowing down the valley-bottom against the barring slope, ran turbulently *uphill* in a series of skyward-leaping rapids and cascades!

Too astonished even for profanity, they stared without comment at this unique reversal of what they were accustomed to regard as natural law. For a considerable distance on either side of the stream, the acclivity was hollowed and worn smooth as if by landslides or a process of slow attrition. Occasionally, as the men stood watching it, a pebble, a lump of conglomerate soil, or a few particles of grit were loosened from the ground, to roll heavenward rapidly and disappear beyond the ragged crest of the slide together with the cascading waters.

Drawn by thoughtless curiosity and wonder, Morris stepped toward the beginning of the slope, which was perhaps ten feet away. It was like stepping over a precipice. The ground seemed to tilt beneath him, and the slope fell like an overturning world, till it pitched *downward* at a steep angle with the sky at its bottom. Unable to arrest his strange fall, he slid sidelong into the rushing water, and was carried roughly and dizzily down the rapids and over the cascades. Half-dazed and breathless, he felt that he was shooting across the world's rim toward a nether gulf in which hung the fallen sun.

Markley, seeing his companion's weird fate, also started toward the acclivity, with some dim instinctive idea of rescuing Morris from the inverted stream. A single step, and he too was seized by the skyward gravitation. Slipping, rolling and bumping as if in a steep chute, and unable to regain his foothold, he slid along the topsy-turvy slope, followed by a shower of detritus, but without falling into the water.

He and Morris, passing the rim of the slide as if hurled toward the reddish-brown sky that was now *beneath* them, each experienced another bewildering *bouleversement.* Morris found himself floundering in a sort of hilltop pool, where the final cascade foamed itself into quiescence; and Markley, stunned and sprawling but with unbroken bones, was lying on a pile of rubble such as would ordinarily gather at the bottom of an escarpment.

Morris scrambled from the pool, which was only waist-deep, and helped Markley to his feet. The local gravity was almost normal from a terrene viewpoint; and plainly all objects that were drawn skyward along the deficiently attractive area were promptly arrested when they reached the top. Headlong and turbulent, the cascade curved over the rim into the level pool.

The earth-men, finding themselves quite unhurt, proceeded to examine their air-suits and helmets for possible damage. Since the local atmosphere was untested, and might well possess deleterious properties, a rift in the leatheroid fabric would perhaps be a serious matter. The suits, however, were intact, and the tubes that supplied oxygen from flat tanks behind the shoulders were in perfect condition.

The height that they had climbed in a fashion so singular was really part of an uneven plateau that appeared to surround the whole valley. The plateau was divided by long hummocks of mottled soil and stone, which rose gradually into bleak uplands and low mountains at a seeming distance of several miles.

From their present vantage, the valley below was an immense sink. They saw the entire course of the tortuous stream, the areas of *outré* vegetation, and the gleaming of some metallic object which they assumed to be their own rocket plant. The Japanese plane was not visible, and was perhaps hidden by one of the plots of forestation. Of course, remembering the optical distortion and displacement which they had encountered so often in their wanderings, they could not be sure of the actual distance, perspective and relationship of the various elements in this bizarre scenery.

Turning again from the valley, they considered the plateau itself. Here the stream, running in a normal and tranquil fashion, entered a ravine and disappeared. The whole landscape was intolerably drear and repellent, with the same chaotic mineral formation as the valley, but without even the anomalous plant-life to relieve its deadly desolation.

The lopsided sun, declining very swiftly, or else subject to the nearly universal optic transposition, had already fallen half-way from its zenith toward the horizon of amorphous mountains in what the men estimated to be less than an hour. The clouds had all melted away, but far off, above the valley, they could still discern the mysterious aerial blurred spot.

"I guess we'd better mosey back toward the boat," said Markley, after

viewing the barren scene with obvious horror. "But we won't try to go the way we came. If we follow the rim of the valley, we ought to find a place where the gravitation won't drag us the wrong way."

Made doubly cautious by their disconcerting experiences, they started along the verge of the sink. For some distance, the ground was littered with detritus, and even with loose boulders that had rolled upward to be arrested at the top. When they came to the end of this rubble, they surmised that they were beyond the belt of reverse gravitation.

Following the rim toward a point where the slope became easier and more gradual, they came suddenly into a zone of heavier gravity than any they had yet entered. At one step their weight appeared to treble; a crushing burden descended upon them; and they could lift their feet only with immense effort.

Struggling against the uncanny pull of the strange earth, and on the verge of panic they heard an indescribable clattering and rustling behind them, and turned their heads laboriously, in much startlement, to ascertain the cause.

Emerging as if from empty air, a concourse of unimaginably monstrous beings had gathered at their very heels on the bleak verge of the plateau. There were scores or hundreds of these entities, who, whether mere beasts or the analogues of humanity, were no less various and freakish in their conformation than the weird flora of the valley-bottom.

Obviously, there was no common norm or type of development as in the terrestrial species. Some of the entities were no less than twelve or thirteen feet tall; others were squat pygmies. Limbs, bodies, and sense-organs were equally diversified. One creature was like a prodigious moonfish mounted on stilts. Another was a legless, rolling globe fringed about the equator with prehensile ropes that served to haul it along by attaching themselves to projections. Still another resembled a wingless bird with a great falcon beak and a tapering serpentine body with lizard legs, that glided half-erect. Some of the creatures possessed double or triple bodies; some were hydra-headed, or equipped with an excessive number of limbs, eyes, mouths, ears and other anatomical features.

Truly these beings were the spawn of chance, the random creations of a lawless biologic force. A horde of fabulous, fantastic, nightmare improbabilities, they surged forward upon Morris and Markley, uttering a babel of wordless sounds, of cacklings, hisses, clucks, ululations, roar-

ings and bellowings. Whether they were hostile or merely curious, the men could not decide. Both were petrified with a horror beyond the horror of evil dreams.

The leaden gravitational drag, rendering the least movement slow and toilsome, re-enforced their sensation of nightmare. Laboriously they drew their pistols, and half-lifting them at the oncoming rout, pulled the triggers. The reports were dull and muffled; the bullets flew with visible slowness, and rebounded harmlessly like tossed pebbles from the monsters that they struck.

Like a stampeding herd, the throng of biologic horrors was upon Morris and Markley. Battling against the gravity as well as against the loathsome bodies and members that engulfed them, they were borne irresistibly along by the seething mass. Their pistols were torn from their hands, they saw hideous faces and faceless things that milled about them like a torrent of the damned in some nether circle. Occasionally, in broken glimpses, they saw a disordered landscape of amorphous rocks, with pools and streams of fine sand, and sudden, fortuitous vegetation like mad mirages, through which they were being carried.

The origin of the monsters, their purpose, their destination, their intention in regard to the earth-men, were enigmatic as the riddles of delirium. Resistance was futile; and Morris and Markley gave themselves up to the rushing motion of the throng, in the hope that some opportunity of escape would ultimately offer itself.

They seemed to go on for hours. The gravitation still varied, but was often constant over large areas. The sun, instead of sinking further, rose again to the zenith. Sometimes there were brief intervals of darkness, as if the light had been shut off by some queer fluctuation of atmospheric properties. Puffs of wild wind arose and died. Rocks and whole hummocks seemed to crumble abruptly on the waste. But through all this chaos of conditions, the monstrous horde poured onward with its captives.

Apparently the earth-men had fallen in with a whole tribe of these anomalous creatures, who were perhaps migrating from one zone of their random world to another. At least, such was the explanation that suggested itself in lieu of positive knowledge.

Markley and Morris became aware that the ground was slanting downward. Over the heads of the monsters, they saw that they had entered a flat, sloping valley. Rough mountains, perhaps the same that

they had beheld from the rim of the sink, appeared to loom at no great distance above them.

The low valley debouched in a sort of shallow, crater-like hollow. Here the horde suddenly arrested its onward rush and began to spread out in a curious manner. Markley and Morris, now able to work their way forward, saw that the creatures had arranged themselves in a ring about the slopes of the circular hollow, leaving a clear space at its bottom.

In the center of the vacant space, a singular phenomenon was manifesting itself. A fountain of fine, hueless powder rose from the stone and soil, attaining a height of three feet. Slowly it widened and rose higher, preserving the form of a round column. Its top mushroomed into a vague cloud, spreading above the heads of the assembled throng and floating skyward. It was as if some process of molecular dissolution were taking place, to form this fountain.

Markley and Morris were fascinated by the spectacle. Before them, the silent, circular crumbling of the ground went on, the column swelled to Titanic proportions, towering above the crater. Seemingly, too, the monsters were fascinated, for none of them stirred to break the ring-like formation.

Then, gradually, as the column of atoms increased, the horde began to surge forward. The ring narrowed till its inmost ranks were driven, close-packed, into the fountain by the pressure from behind. Visibly, as the creatures entered it, their limbs and bodies melted like bursting puff-balls, to swell the columnar cloud of dissolution that mounted skyward.

"Are they all going to commit suicide and take us with them?" Markley's voice was a horror-tautened whisper. He and Morris, caught in the forward ranks, were being forced slowly toward the fountain. Only two rows of the monsters now intervened; and even as Markley spoke, the bodies of the inmost row began to dissolve in the column.

The earth-men struggled desperately against the massed bodies that crowded from behind. But the living wall, close and implacable, as if bent on nothing but self-immolation, drove them downward inch by inch.

Overhead, the sun was blinded by the mushrooming column. The sky took on a madder-brown twilight. Then, with a suddenness as of some atmospheric legerdemain, the twilight blacked into Cimmerian darkness.

A mad, elemental howling tore the air, a blind hurricane filled the crater, blowing as if from above; and bolts of lightning leapt upward from the ground, enshrouding with blue and violet fire the horrible horde of biologic anomalies.

The pressure behind the earth-men relaxed. A panic seemed to have seized the monsters, who were now dispersing in the bolt-riven darkness. The earth-men, fighting their way upward, stumbled over the half-charred bodies of those who had been slain by the lightning. By intermittent flashes, they saw, looking back, that the column of atomic dissolution still poured from the crater's bottom, to merge with the seething storm that had risen as if at random from nowhere.

Miraculously untouched by the lightning, Morris and Markley found themselves in the flat valley through which they had entered the crater. Most of the monsters had now disappeared, melting away like the shadow of a nightmare; and the last flashes revealed little but vacant soil and rock.

The lightning ceased, leaving the men in darkness. An irresistible wind, like a torrent of rushing water, bore them along through the Stygian night, and they lost all trace of each other henceforth. Often hurled headlong, or lifted bodily from the ground at the mercy of lawless, anarchic elements, they were blown apart like lost leaves.

Abruptly as it had begun, the tumult fell in a great stillness. The darkness dissolved from the heavens. Morris, lying dazed and breathless, found himself alone amid barren reaches of rock and sand. He could trace nothing familiar in the landscape. The mountains were lost to view, and he saw no sign of the fountain of molecules. It was as if he had been transported to another tract of this fantastic realm of chance.

Halloing loudly, but answered only by sardonic echoes, he started off at random in an effort to find Markley. Once or twice, amid the shifting, illusive imageries through which he wandered, he thought that he saw the mountains that had loomed beyond the crater of dissolution.

The sun, changing it apparent position by leaps and bounds, was now close to the horizon, and its rays were indescribably dark and eerie. Morris, plodding doggedly on amid the delusive advances and recessions of the dreary landscape, came without warning to a flat valley that was somehow familiar. Before him the lost mountains re-appeared as if by magic; and going on, he emerged in the crater-like hollow.

Many of the charred monsters, slain by the electric storm, were strewn about the slopes. But the fountain itself was no longer active. A round, funnel-like pit, twenty feet in diameter, yawned dark and silent at the bottom of the hollow.

Morris felt the descent of an overmastering despair. Lost as he was in this awful trans-dimensional limbo, and separated from his comrade, whose fate he could not imagine, the prospect was indeed drear and hopeless. His whole body ached with accumulated fatigue; his mouth and throat were afire with corrosive thirst. Though the oxygen still poured freely from his tank, he could not tell how much of the supply remained. A few hours, at most, and then his ordeals might end in asphyxiation. Momentarily crushed by the horror of it all, he sat down on the crater slope in the rusty-brown gloom.

Curiously, the twilight did not darken. As if in a reversed ecliptic, the sun returned slowly into the heavens. But Morris, in his despair, hardly heeded this *outré* phenomenon.

Staring dully at the re-illumined ground, he saw the appearance of several grotesque, anomalous shadows that fell past him on the slope. Startled from his lethargy, he sprang up. A dozen or more of the monstrous people had returned. Some of them were gnawing the cindery bodies of their late companions; but three, as if disdaining such fare, were closing in upon Morris.

Even as he turned, they assailed him. One of them, a headless thing with ropy arms and a puckered, mouth-like orifice in the center of its gourd-shaped body, tried to drag him down with its frightfully elongated members. Another, which might have been some heraldic griffin minus wings and feathers, began to peck at his air-suit with its tremendous horny beak. The third, which was more like a horribly overgrown toad than anything else, hopped about him on the ground and mumbled his ankles with its toothless mouth.

Sick with nausea, Morris struggled against them. Time and again he kicked away the toad-like creature, which returned with noisome pertinacity. He could not loosen the ropy members of the headless horror, which had wrapped themselves about him in plastic folds. But his worst fear was that the griffin would tear open his leatheroid garments with its slicing beak. He hammered the huge bird-shaped body with his fists, driving it away repeatedly; but as if mad with rage or hunger, it re-as-

sailed him. His legs and body were sore in a dozen places from the blows of the cruel beak.

Beyond his attackers, he caught involuntary glimpses of the horrid feast that was being enjoyed by their fellows. It was like the feeding of harpies in some infernal circle; and Morris could surmise his own imminent fate all too clearly. He saw that several of the feeders, quitting their half-eaten provender, were turning in his direction as if to join the three assailants.

Instinctively, as he fought on, he heard the sound of a measured drumming from above. The sound drew nearer and ceased. In a turn of the eddying combat, he saw that two gigantic beings had arrived among the monsters, and were standing a little apart, as if watching the gruesome orgy with detached interest.

Even amid the frightful preoccupation of his struggles, he noticed a strange thing. The new arrivals, alone of all the life-forms that he and Markley had met in this erratic world, seemed to approximate a common type of physical development. Both of them stood erect, and their conformation was vaguely human in its outlines, except for the enormous wings, ribbed and leathery as those of ancient pterodactyls, which hung half-folded at their backs. Their coloration was a dark, bituminous brown, verging upon ebon blackness in the wings, and lightened somewhat in their heads and faces. They were massively built, with a stature of eleven or twelve feet, and aquiline, sloping hairless heads that denoted a large brain-capacity. No trace of ears could be detected; but two round, luminous, golden-yellow eyes were set far apart in their faces above sphinx-like mouths and nostrils. Somehow they made Morris think of Satanic angels; but their aspect was not malign, and was wholly poised, aloof and dispassionate.

Such were the impressions he received, without conscious assortment or definition at the time. Without interlude, the atrocious battle with the three monsters continued. Presently, however, one of the gigantic winged beings came with prodigious strides toward the earth-man and his attackers, as if to watch the uneven combat. Morris felt the regard of the great yellow eyes, which, inscrutable themselves, appeared to search him through and read the inmost secrets of his mind.

The being stepped closer, lifted an enormous hand in a leisurely but imperious gesture. As if fearful or cognizant of a superior power, the

loathsome assailants abandoned their efforts to drag Morris down, and slunk away to assuage their hunger on an un-preempted carrion that lay beside the pit in the crater's bottom.

A dreadful faintness surged upon the earth-man—a reaction from all the intolerable horrors and fatigues of the day. Amid the whirling darkness into which he slid, he saw the gleaming of two mesmeric golden eyes, and felt the firm grasp of giant hands that seemed to support and lift him.

An electric shock ran through him at their touch. Miraculously, his faintness cleared away, leaving him wonderfully alert. Strength seemed to flow into him from the mighty hands: magnetic strength, buoyant and preterhuman. The horror faded from his shaken nerves, he was no longer lost and bewildered, but was filled with a mystic confidence.

The experience that he now underwent was perhaps the strangest of all that befell him in the dimension of chance. Also, it was the hardest to remember or describe.

Beneath the thrilling touch of the winged being, whose hands held him firmly by the shoulders, he seemed almost to pass beyond his own consciousness. Thoughts that were not his own rose up and limned themselves with the clearness of actual visions or objective impressions. In some ineffable way, he shared for a moment the thoughts and memories of the being who had rescued him from the monsters. Whether or not an intentional telepathy was being exerted, he never quite knew; but alien vistas, beheld through unfamiliar senses, appeared to open before him.

The two winged beings, he knew, were members of a race that was far from numerous. They were the rulers of this outlandish world, the self-made masters of its incalculable forces and disoragnized elements. Their evolution had been supremely difficult and painful. Through their own volition, they had risen from a state that was little higher than that of the unhappy monsters. They had developed faculties that enabled them to circumvent the lawlessness of their environment, to forecast its very randomness, and impose law and order on the ever-changing chaos. They had even learned to control their own environment.

The nightmare hollow in which Morris stood had temporarily vanished. There came to him the sense of tremendous flight above strange horizons. He seemed to pass on lofty wings over wastes of chaotically

piled and tumbled rocks with the being whom he knew as one of the Masters of Chance. Amid the shifting mirages of desolation, through distorting zones of air, above realms that pitched obliquely for immeasurable leagues, like the flattened side of some malformed planet, he flew unerringly to his destination.

Beyond the chaos, on tiered mountains that rose stupendously, he beheld the high and many-terraced citadels of the Masters. As if he had trodden their battlements, he knew the white walls of a majestically ordered architecture that defied the erratic formlessness of the world beneath, and imposed their harmonic sternness on the tumbled waste. He knew the terraces, lined with geometric rows of trees and flowers, in which, by some miracle of horticultural mastery, the random flora had been subdued and had taken on the characters of type and species.

Dimly, to the limit of his human thought-capacity, he understood something of the Masters. Their powers were those of dynamic will, of magnetism and sense-development; and they did not depend entirely on mere physical science or machinery. In former ages, they had been more numerous, had ruled a larger area of that unstable, incalculably treacherous world. It seemed that the apex of their evolution had passed; though still powerful, they were menaced more and more by the beleaguering forces of cosmic anarchy.

Such were the things that Morris learned in that moment of communion with his rescuer. Returning to his own proper consciousness, he felt also that the telepathic interchange had been mutual: the being had read his own history, his predicament of hopeless alienation in a strange world; and in some inscrutably benign way, was minded to help him.

He left no surprise, whatever, at the more than *outré* happenings that ensued. Somehow, as if he shared the ability of his protector to read the future, all that occurred was familiar as a twice-told tale. In this bizarre but fore-known drama, the winged being lifted him gently but firmly, making a cradle of its vast arms, and spreading its ebon wings, mounted swiftly toward the misshapen sun. Its companion followed; and Morris knew, as they flew steadily above the changing zones of gravitation, above the dreary jumble of wandering mirages, that they were seeking for Markley.

In a dim, partial way, he seemed to share the clairvoyance of the Masters, which enabled them to distinguish the real from the illusory

amid the disordered refraction of their atmosphere. He, too, was gifted with a televisual faculty by which he could scan the remote or hidden portions of the waste.

Sure and undeviating, the mighty leathern wings beat onward toward their goal. Amid the kaleidoscopes of desolation, there appeared the rough rim of the valley in which Morris and Markley had left their rocket plane.

Swifter grew the beating of the wings, louder was their drumming, as if haste were needed. A strange anxiety mounted in Morris, lest they should be too late.

Now they hovered above the valley, slanting groundward. The place had changed, in some fashion that Morris could not define to himself for a moment. Then he realized that certain of the ringing bluffs and slopes had crumbled away, were still crumbling, to form a moving sea of hueless sand. In places, columns of atomic powder mounted like geysers; some of the areas of forestation had fallen into shapeless heaps of dust, like disintegrated fungi. These sudden, erratic, localized decompositions of matter were common phenomena of the world of chance; and it came to Morris, as part of his mystic knowledge, that the order which the Masters had wrested from chaos was not wholly secure against their inroads.

Anxiously, with a breathless fear, he scanned the area into which the mighty being who carried him was descending on sloped wings. Markley was somewhere in that area, to which he had wandered back in a blind, bewildered search for his lost companion; and danger—a double danger—threatened him now.

As if with the keen, straight-seeing eyes of the Master, Morris discerned a rocket plane on the valley floor, and knew it to be the one that the Japanese had used. Seemingly it was deserted, and the moving tide of sand from the crumbling cliffs engulfed it even as he watched.

In the middle of the valley, he descried the glittering of another plane—the one that belonged to Markley. Four tiny figures were milling to and fro beside it, as if in wild combat. Upon them, unheeded, the deluge of dissolution was advancing swiftly. The sands rolled in crested billows. The trees swelled and soared to monstrous arboreal phantoms, and dissolved in pulverous clouds. Pillars of freed molecules

built themselves up from the valley-bottom, and were shaped into ominous, floating domes that obscured the sun.

It was a scene of elemental terror and silent tumult. Across it, sloping and dipping, the wings of the Masters drummed, till they hovered above the knot of struggling figures.

Three men in helmets and air-suits were attacking a fourth, who was similarly attired. The weakness of the local gravity, however, made the combat less unequal that it might have seemed. Also, it served to lighten the blows which the contestants succeeded in delivering.

Markley, in great, twenty-foot leaps, was eluding the Japanese much of the time; but plainly he was tiring; and the three would corner him soon. Several automatic pistols, discarded as if empty or useless, were lying on the ground; but one of the Japanese had drawn an ugly, curved knife, and was watching his chance for a thurst at the darting figure of Markley.

In their desperate struggle, none of the four had perceived the arrival of the Masters. It was Markley who saw them first. As if stupefied, he paused in one of his rushes, and stared at Morris and the winged beings.

Two of the Japanese turned and also beheld the hovering figures. They stood as if petrified with astonishment or terror. But the third, intent on delivering a thrust with his wicked knife, had not seen them; and he flew in a long, aerial leap at Markley.

The second Master, hanging in air beside Morris' projector, raised his right hand and pointed at the flying Japanese. For an instant, his fingers seemed to clutch and hurl a great javelin of living fire. The javelin leapt and faded—and the Japanese, a shapeless pile of fuming cinders, lay at Markley's feet.

The other two, shielding their goggled eyes with their hands, as if the terrible lance of light had blinded them, rushed toward the oncoming storm of atomic disintegration. Before them, on the valley floor, a sudden pillar of dust ascended, swelling awfully as it ate the conglomerate soil. It seemed to topple upon them—and they were gone.

Morris, watching in a wordless awe, felt that the lifting arms had been withdrawn—that his feet had been set on the ground. Close above him, the two Masters towered, with spread wings. As if an urgent voice

had spoken aloud, he knew the things that must be done without delay.

"Come—we can start the plane!" he cried to Markley. "We've got to move in a hurry."

Markley, who had been staring at the Masters, appeared to emerge from a sort of trance.

"All right, if you say so—and if the fuel will explode," he agreed. "But before we go, I'd like to thank your winged friend for browning Sakamoto. I don't know how it was done; but he sure has a wicked jolt. That Jap would have laid me open like a gutted fish, in another split-second."

A sudden, howling wind blew down the valley, spreading the dust-billows like a blown spray, and lifting the atomic columns into a roof of doom. Swiftly the storm of dissolution gathered, rushing toward the plane.

Markley, following by Morris, sprang for the open manhole. While Morris swung the heavy lid into place, his companion leapt to the control-board. As if by some miracle of chance, or some change in the unknown, interfering force, his pressure of the starting-lever was answered by the loud roar of discharging rockets. The plane lifted, acquiring momentum, till it soared above the seething valley.

Looking back through one of the ports, Morris perceived the two flying colossi, who hung aloof in the heavens, as if watching the departure of the plane. Serene, impassive, on poised wings, they floated beyond the atomic storm, which had already begun to subside.

He turned away with a strange awe, a reverential gratitude. Beneath Markley's skillful guidance, the plane was heading straight for the formless atmospheric blur that still blotted the reddish-brown sky.

Again Morris looked back. High, far, and tiny, between the malformed sun and the chaotically strewn and riven world, the mysterious beings whom he knew as the Masters of Chance flew steadily on level wings toward their remote city. It was his last sight of them; and already the mystic knowledge that had been imparted to him was fading a little in his brain.

The telepathic vision of the citadels that imposed their severe architectural ordination on a mad terrain; the supernal, hard-won power of the Masters, battling perpetually against lawless elements and the treacherous, intractable forces of a cosmic Pandemonium—all had be-

come slightly unreal, like a dreamland from which the dreamer is departing.

Now the blind aerial blur had enveloped the vessel. Greyness, clinging and all-pervasive, filled it like an atmosphere of cotton-wool. Sight, sound—even feeling and thought—were lost as if in some hinterland of oblivion.

Out of the blur, as if from a formless, hueless dream of death between two lives, the plane and its occupants floated into the dark azure of the terrene stratosphere. Sight, consciousness, feeling, memory, returned in a sudden flood to Morris and Markley. Below them again, they saw in mottled relief the familiar reaches of Nevada, edged with white and saw-like mountains.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF EARTH

IN THE year 2197, the first intimation of a strange peril of world-wide scope and gravity came and passed unrecognized for what it really was in the form of a newspaper dispatch from the Sahara, reporting a sand-storm of unprecedented fury. Several oases, according to the report, had been entirely blotted out, and a number of caravans had been lost in the sweep of the tremendous storm, which had towered to a height of twelve thousand feet and had covered many hundred square miles. No one caught in it had come out alive nor had any trace of the missing caravans been found. Subsequent dispatches brought the news that the affected region was full of minor upheavals for weeks after the cessation of the main disturbance, and that a furore of superstitious fear had been excited among the desert tribes, who believed that the end of the world was now imminent. But, in the surge and press of more sensational and apparently more important items then engaging the world's attention, no one, not even the most advanced and alert men of science, gave more than a passing thought to the sandstorm.

Toward the end of the same year, there came a fresh report from the Sahara, this time of so strange and inexplicable a nature that it immediately aroused the curiosity of many scientists, who forthwith formed an expedition to investigate the conditions that had given rise to the report. The members of a caravan from Timbuctoo, the first to venture into the path of the great storm, had returned within a week, half-mad

with terror and telling incoherently of unaccountable changes that had taken place all through the disturbed area. They said that the long, rolling dunes of sand had all disappeared, to be replaced by solid earth and mineral forms such as no one had ever seen before. The earth consisted of great patches of a sort of violet-colored clay, very moist, and with a noxious odor that had almost overpowered those who ventured to walk upon it.

Also, there were outcroppings, immense ledges, and even hills of singular stone and metals. The stone was mainly crystallized, with red, black, blue and dark-green colors, and the metals were white and iridescent. The members of the caravan swore that they had seen huge boulders heave visibly from the earth before their eyes, and had watched the crystals swell on the sides of these boulders. Over all the changed area, they said, there were vapors that arose continually, forming a dense canopy of cloud that shut out the sun. But, in spite of this fact, the heat was more intense than any they had ever known, and had an intolerably humid character. Another odd thing they had noticed was, that the sand immediately contiguous to this area had become so fine and pulverous that it soared in high clouds at every step of their camels, who had almost been engulfed in it. They all believed implicitly that Iblees, the Mohammedan Satan, had come to establish his kingdom on earth, and, as a preparatory measure, was creating for himself and his subject demons a suitable soil and atmosphere resembling those of the infernal realms. Henceforth, the region was utterly shunned, till the arrival of the investigating scientists, headed by Roger Lapham, the most renowned American geologist of the period.

II

Lapham and his party, in which were several celebrated chemists as well as some fellow-geologists, had chartered two airplanes, and the trip to Timbuctoo, where they paused to interview personally the members of the returned caravan, was a matter of only a few hours.

A new and unexpected angle was added to the strange story, when the scientists learned that eight of the twelve natives whom they desired to see had fallen dangerously ill in the interim since the sending of the last news dispatch. So far, no one had been able to diagnose their illness, which had presented a combination of symptoms no less inexplicable than unfamiliar. These symptoms were quite varied, and differed

somewhat in the individual cases, though acute respiratory and mental disorders were common to all. Several of the men had shown a violent homicidal mania which they were already too weak and ill to carry to the point of action; others had tried to commit suicide in a sudden and delirious excess of melancholia and nervous terror; and six of the eight were afflicted with peculiar cutaneous disturbances which would have suggested leprosy if it had not been that the diseased portions, which developed and increased with remarkable rapidity, were of a bright green color instead of being white, and had purplish borders. The pulmonary symptoms were not dissimilar to those experienced by men who have inhaled some sort of deadly gas, and were marked by a swift eating-away of the tissues. Two of the men died on the evening of the same day that Lapham and his companions arrived in Timbuctoo, and by noon of the following day the four who had been so far exempt were stricken down. They suffered all the symptoms presented by their fellows, with the addition, even during the earlier stages, of a form of locomotor ataxia and a queer disorder of vision which constituted an inability to see plainly in broad daylight, though their sight was normal at other times. They, as well as most of the others, now developed a terrible condition of necrosis involving the whole bony structure of the body, and within two days all were dead.

Lapham and his brother-scientists talked with these men and did what little could be done to palliate their agonies. No more could be learned, however, than the news-dispatches had already proffered in the way of information, apart from the fact that the caravan-members attributed their illness to contact with the uncanny clay and minerals on which they had come in the heart of the Sahara. Those who had ventured the furthest into the strange area had been the first to develop this illness.

It became evident to the scientists that their proposed explorations might be accompanied by grave bodily dangers. One of the planes was immediately sent to England for a supply of gas masks, oxygen, and complete suits of an insulative material designed to protect against everything then known to science in the form of harmful radio-activity.

As soon as the planes returned, bringing the requisite supplies, the journey into the Sahara was resumed. Following at an altitude of one thousand feet the northern caravan route toward Insalah and Ghadames,

the scientists soon began to penetrate the Juf desert, amid whose golden-yellow dunes the affected area was said to lie.

An odd spectacle now presented itself to them. Far-off on the horizon was a low-lying mass of clouds or vapors—a thing almost without precedent in that dry, rainless region. These clouds or vapors were of a pearly-gray color, and they covered not only hundreds of leagues of the rolling sand, or what had once been sand, but also seemed to encroach upon the rocky, weather-worn terrain to east of the Juf. Nothing could be seen of the geological changes that had taken place, till the airplanes had approached within a few miles of the vapor-mass. Then the exploring party had a glimpse of the vari-colored soil and minerals described by the natives, now dimly discernible through the writhing fumes that still arose from them.

Before landing, the scientists flew slowly above the vapors to determine their extent and density. They found that the mass was circular in form and was at least a hundred miles in diameter. It constituted a level and uniform floor, dazzlingly bright in the sunshine, and with no breaks or variations anywhere.

After crossing and circumnavigating the whole cloud-mass, a landing was made near the southern verge, and the expedition proceeded to encamp. The day was still new, since they had made an early start; and Lapham and the others were eager to begin their investigations without delay. Putting on their insulative suits and equipping themselves with the gas-masks and oxygen-tanks, the whole party set out forthwith.

They had not gone far when they encountered the fine sand or dust of which the caravan-members had spoken. They sank to the waist in this sand at every step, but its inconceivable lightness made their progress not so difficult as it would normally have been. At every footfall, at every touch or movement, the fine powder soared in a huge cloud, which, as they had occasion to observe, took hours to settle itself again. None of them had ever seen such dust before, and the chemists in the party could scarcely wait to analyze it.

At last, after much wandering and floundering in the dust-cloud, through which they could see nothing, Lapham and his companions drew themselves out on a margin of the strange violet soil. The contrast of this wet, steaming clay with the gulfs of atom-like powder that surrounded it was so inexplicable, so utterly amazing as to baffle and

dumbfound all conjecture. The substance was unearthly in its bizarreness, and the heat that emanated from it was almost beyond endurance. The scientists had sweltered in their heavy air-tight suits while crossing the zone of dust, but now they were subjected to actual suffering.

At every step their astonishment grew, for the dim landscape beneath the vapors was such as no human eye had even seen before. Gigantic ledges of crystallized rock-forms arose in the foreground, and about the crystals there was something, even apart from their curious black, blue, red and dark-green coloration, which served to differentiate them from anything classified by geologists. They were prodigious in size, and had innumerable facets and a look of geometrical complexity foreign to all normal rocks. There was a sinister vitality in their aspect, too, and the tale of the natives, who purported to have seen them grow and swell, became almost comprehensible. Somehow, they resembled living organisms as much as minerals. Everywhere, also, were outcroppings of the white and iridescent metals that had been described.

As the party advanced, the ledges grew larger, and towered overhead in cliffs and precipices and crags, among which the explorers found a tortuous, winding way. The crags were horned and beetling, and weird beyond imagination. It was like a scene in some other world; and nothing to which the scientists came in the course of their wanderings was in any manner suggestive of the familiar Terra Firma.

After groping their way through narrow rifts and along the rim of fantastic scarps where all foothold was precarious, they emerged amid the crags, on the shelving shore of a lake of blackish-green water, whose full extent was indeterminate. Lapham, who was ahead of the others, half-lost in the coils of the rising vapors, cried out suddenly, and when his companions overtook him, they found him stooping above a queer plant with etiolated fungus-like stalk and broad, serrate leaves of a carnal crimson, mottled with gray blotches. Around it, the pinkish tips of younger plants were protruding from the soil, and they seemed to wax visibly beneath the astounded gaze of the explorers.

"What on earth is it?" cried Lapham.

"As far as I can see, it isn't anything that could legitimately exist on earth," rejoined Sylvester, one of the chemists, who had made a sideline of botany. They all gathered about the queer plant and examined it minutely. The leaves and stalks were extremely fibrous in their texture and were full of deep pores like those of coral. But when Lapham tried

to break off a portion, it proved to be very tough and rubbery, and the use of a knife was necessitated before the branch could be severed. The plant writhed and twisted like a living creature at the touch of the knife, and when the operation was finally accomplished, a juice that bore a startling resemblance to blood in its color and consistency, began to exude slowly. The severed section was placed in a knapsack for future analysis.

Now the scientists proceeded toward the margin of the lake. Here they found some plant-growths of a different type, suggesting calamites, or giant reeds. These plants were twenty feet tall and were divided into a dozen segments with heavy, swollen-looking joints. They had no leaves, and their hues varied from a leaden purple to a leprous white with green shadowings and veinings. Although there was no wind, all of them were swaying a little, with a sound like the hissing of serpents. As Lapham and his confreres came closer, they saw that the reeds were covered with lip-like formations that recalled the suckers of an octopus.

Sylvester was now in advance of the others. As he neared the foremost plant, the thing swayed suddenly forward with all the suppleness and celerity of a python and encircled the chemist in a series of constricting coils. Sylvester screamed in terror as the coils tightened about him, and the others ran instantly to his aid, though dumb-founded and well-nigh stupefied by the strangeness of the happening. Several of them carried clasp-knives, and these were at once requisitioned in effecting his release. Lapham and two of the chemists began to hack and saw at the horrible coils, while the reed continued its constriction about the limbs and body of the helpless man.

The plant was amazingly tough and resistant, and Lapham's knife-blade broke before he had sawed half through the section upon which he was engaged. His companions, however, were more successful, and at length the diabolical growth was severed in two places, one of which was not far from the root. But the coils still clung around their victim, who had gone suddenly pale and limp, and who now fell in a dead faint as his companions finished their task. It was found that some of the sucker-like formations had penetrated his insulative suit and were actually embedded in his flesh. Slowly, in squirming segments, the coils were cut away; but nothing could be done at present with the suckers, for want of the proper surgical instruments; and it was obviously imperative that Sylvester should be taken back to camp as quickly as possible.

Carrying the still unconscious man among them by turns, the explorers retraced their steps amid the crags and ledges of many-colored crystals, along the perilous rim of steaming cliffs and gulfs, and found their way through the zone of atomic dust, till they reemerged, altogether exhausted and frightfully shaken, on the shore of the natural desert. In spite of their urgent haste, however, they took with them some specimens of the crystals, of the white and irridescent metals and the violet soil, as well as parts of the python-like reed, for future examination; and they greatly deplored their inability to secure also some of the water in the blackish-green lake. After the chemist's experience, no one would have dared to venture among the fringing reeds along its shore.

Sylvester required immediate attention, for he was white and bloodless as a vampire's victim, and his pulse-beats were very slow and so feeble as to be almost undetectable. His clothing was removed and he was stretched on an improvised operating-table. It was now seen that the portions of his limbs and trunk in which the suckers had implanted themselves were horribly swollen and discolored; and this swelling rendered the task of removal all the more difficult. There was nothing to do but cut the suckers out; and after the administration of an opiate, which seemed scarcely needful under the circumstances, the operation was performed by Dr. Adams, the physician of the party. It was evident that Sylvester had been dreadfully poisoned by the suckers, for even after their removal, the flesh in which they had sunk continued to swell, and soon turned to a putrescent black which threatened to involve his whole body. At no time did he recover full consciousness, though during the night after the explorers' return, he began to toss and mutter weakly in a sort of low delirium, which presently merged into a coma from which he did not awaken. At ten the next morning, Dr. Adams announced that Sylvester was dead. It was necessary to inter him at once, for his body presented the appearance and all the usual characteristics of a week-old corpse.

A sense of ominous gloom and oppression was thrown over the whole party by the chemist's fate, but it was of course felt that nothing should be permitted to delay, or interfere with, the work of investigation that had been undertaken. No sooner had the unfortunate Sylvester been laid to rest in a hurried grave amid the Saharan sands, when his fellow-scientists began eagerly their examination of the specimens they had secured. These were all studied under powerful microscopes and

were subjected to chemical analysis of the most searching and rigorous order. Many known constituents were found, but all of these were immingled with elements for which chemistry had no names. The molecular formation of the crystals was more intricate than that of any substance known on earth; and the metals were heavier than anything so far discovered. The cellular composition of the two plant-forms was oddly similar to that of animal bodies, and it was readily ascertained that they were intermediate between the animal and vegetable kingdoms, partaking of the character of both. How such minerals and plants could have appeared suddenly, in a location so obviously impossible even for the fostering of normal forms, was a theme of endless argument and inconclusive surmise between Lapham and his confreres. For a while, no one could propound a theory that seemed at all plausible or credible. Apart from everything else, they were puzzled by the zone of fine dust about the changed area: this zone was found to consist of sand-particles whose very molecules had been partially broken up and disintegrated.

"It looks," said Lapham, "as if someone or something had blown up all the atoms in this part of the Sahara, and had then started a totally new process of re-integration and evolution, with the development of soil, water, minerals, atmosphere and plants such as could never have existed on the earth during any of its geological epochs."

This startling theory was discussed pro and con, and was finally adopted as the only explanation that contained elements of plausibility. But it remained to determine the agency of the geological and evolutionary changes; and of course no one could propound anything decisive as to the nature of the agency. The whole thing was enough to stagger the imagination of a Jules Verne; and with scientists of such indubitable rectitude as Lapham and his fellows, the fantasies of lawless imagination had no place. They were concerned only with things that could be verified and proven according to natural laws.

Several days were devoted to analyzing, re-analyzing and theorizing. Then a report of the conditions that had been found was drawn up, and it was decided to send a summary of this report by radio to Europe and America. An attempt to use the radios carried by the party revealed a peculiar condition of absolute static that prevailed above the vapor-covered region. No messages could be sent or received across this region, though communication was readily established with points that were not

in a direct line with the new area, such as Rome, Cairo, Petrograd, Havana and New Orleans. This condition of static was permanent—at least, many reported efforts, at all hours of the day and night, were utterly ineffectual. One of the planes, carrying a radio-apparatus, soared to a height of nine thousand feet above the encampment and sought to establish the desired connection, but in vain. It was necessary for the plane to cross the whole cloud-mass, to the northern side, before New York and London could receive and return its messages.

"It would seem," observed Lapham, "as if some sort of ultra-powerful ray, that prevents the passage of radio vibrations, had been turned on this part of the Sahara. Evidently there is a screen of interfering force."

While arguments as to the validity of this theory, the nature and origin of the conjectural rays, and their possible relation to the geologic changes, were still in progress, two members of the party complained of feeling ill. Both of them, on examination by Dr. Adams, were discovered to be afflicted with cutaneous symptoms resembling those that had been developed by many of the caravan from Timbuctoo. The characteristic patches of bright green, with purplish borders, were spreading rapidly on their arms and shoulders, and soon invaded the exposed portions of the skin. The two men became mildly delirious within a few hours, and gave evidence of extreme nervous depression. Simultaneously with this turn of their illness, Dr. Adams himself grew conscious of a sudden feeling of indisposition. Obviously, the insulative clothing worn by the explorers had been inadequate for their protection against whatever lethal forces were inherent in the new soil, minerals and vapor-laden atmosphere. It was decided that the party must return to civilization immediately, before others should be stricken.

Camp was broken up, and the two planes were headed for Great Britain. During the brief journey, all of the scientists began to fall ill, and the pilot of one of the planes collapsed, allowing the controllness air-vessel to plunge into the Atlantic near the coast of Spain. The crew of the second plane, seeing the accident, flew gallantly to the rescue, and succeeded in saving Lapham and Dr. Adams, who were struggling in the waters. Their companions, including the sick pilot, were all drowned. It was a sad remnant of the expedition which landed at London.

III

In the meanwhile, the summary of the explorers' report, dispatched with so much difficulty by radio, had been published in all the leading dailies of the world and had aroused universal interest amid the scientific fraternity. The press was full of theories and conjectures, some of them extremely wild and fantastic. One journal went so far as to insinuate that the Saharan manifestations were part of a plan for world-domination that was being put into practice by the United Oriental Federation, which then included China, Indo-China, Burma, and Japan; and others were inclined to name Russia as the instigator.

On the very same day when Lapham and his companions reached London, there came from the United States the news of a terrible and mysterious cataclysm, which had occurred in Missouri and which had involved at least half of this state. Though the time was still mid-winter and the ground was covered with unmelting snow, a tremendous storm of dust had appeared, in which many towns and cities, including St. Louis, had been utterly swallowed up. All communications with these towns and cities had been cut off, and no message, no living thing nor evidence of life, had come forth from the storm. There were great billowing clouds, that soared to a stupendous height, and from which emerged a sound like the rumbling of thunder, or the explosion of unaccountable tons of dynamite. The dust, of unbelievable fineness, settled upon many miles of the adjacent areas, and nothing could be done or determined for days, since all who dared to approach the raging storm were instantly lost and never returned. The terror and mystery of a cataclysm so unparalleled, so far beyond all explanation or imagination, fell like a black pall upon the United States, and horrified the whole civilized world. The dust from the storm, which was analyzed at once, was found to consist of partially disintegrated molecules; and it required no great reach of fantasy for scientists, reporters and the general public to associate the upheaval with the Saharan sand-storm that had given birth to a terrain of unearthly strangeness.

The news was brought to Lapham and his fellows in the hospital to which they had been taken from the plane. Several of the party were too ill to comprehend intelligently what had taken place; but Lapham and Dr. Adams, both of whom were less severely stricken than the others, were at once prepared to comment on the report from America.

"I believe," said Lapham, "that some cosmic process has been instituted which may threaten the integrity and even the continued existence of our world—at least, of any world which we could call ours, and in which human beings could dwell and survive. I predict that within a few weeks, geological and atmospheric conditions similar to those which we found in the Sahara will also prevail in Missouri."

This prophetic utterance, made to reporters from the *Times* and the *Daily Mail,* received considerable publicity and added to the world-wide consternation and terror that was being felt.

While dispatches announcing the continuation of the atomic storm were still agitating five continents, several of the returned explorers died from the unknown malady by which they had been seized. Their cases were characterized by nearly all the symptoms that had been noted in the members of the unfortunate caravan from Timbuctoo, but lacked the pulmonary disorders, from which, it was evident, the use of oxygen-tanks had saved the expedition. Extreme weakness, melancholia, the green, leprous patches, locomotor ataxia, partial blindness and the final necrosis of the bones were all present, and little could be done to mitigate them by any of the attendant doctors, among whom were the most renowned specialists of Great Britain, France, and America. Lapham and Dr. Adams were the only members of the party who survived, and neither of them was ever wholly well at any future time. Till the end of their days, both men suffered from more or less mental depression and from recurrent outbreaks of the cutaneous symptoms.

An odd aftermath of the whole affair was, that similar maladies were contracted in a milder degree by many scientists who examined the mineral and vegetable specimens that had been carefully brought back from Africa by the expedition. No one could isolate or identify the properties that gave rise to such disorders; but it was assumed that rays belonging to the ultra-violet or infra-red ranges, and more powerful than anything hitherto discovered, were being given off by the odd substances. These rays, it was all too evident, were deleterious to human health and life.

While Lapham and Dr. Adams were still lying in hospital, fresh news-items continued to come from America. One of these items was, that two planes, driven by world-famous aviators, had tried to surmount the terrific dust-storm that still raged in Missouri. The storm, like its Saharan fellow, was about twelve thousand feet in height, and it was not thought that any difficulty would be encountered in crossing it at a

sufficient altitude. Also, it was believed that some valuable data might be gathered thereby. The planes flew to an elevation of thirteen thousand before approaching the borders of the storm, but on passing above the rim of the involved area, they were both seen to disappear suddenly in mid-air by people who were watching their flight with field glasses. Neither of the planes ever returned to earth, nor could any sign of them be located.

"Fools!" cried Lapham, when he heard the news of their disappearance. "Of course, when they invaded the vertical area of the storm, they were exposed to the same disintegrative influences that are operating on the earth below. These influences, as I surmised, are coming from outer space. The planes and their aviators have been dissolved into sub-molecular dust."

No more attempts were made to cross the storm, and a widespread exodus of people from the adjacent regions, which had been going on ever since the initial cataclysm, became almost universal in the next few days. Hardly anyone remained, with the exception of a few redoutable scientists, who wished to be on the ground for purposes of investigation when the upheaval should subside.

Within a week, the storm began to lessen in height and fury, and the clouds became broken and less dense. But, as in the case of the African disturbance, there were minor agitations and upswirlings for another week or more. Then it was perceived that masses of vapor were replacing the dust; and a solid canopy of pearly-gray cloud was soon formed above the whole region. All around this region, the winter snows were buried beneath a mile-wide zone of the sub-molecular powder.

In spite of the awful fate that had befallen the Timbuctoo caravan and the geological expedition, there wre several scientists brave enough to venture within the St. Louis area when the rising vapors gave proof that the processes of disintegration were at an end. They found the same exotic soil, the same minerals, metals and water that had been discovered in the heart of the Juf desert; but the alien plant-forms had not yet begun to appear. Some of the water was secured for analysis: apart from the usual constituents of water, it was found to contain an element oddly similar to a certain synthetic gas, more lethal than anything hitherto devised, which had lately been invented for use in warfare. This element, however, was not decomposable into the separate elements from which its analogue had been formed by American chemists. Still

another gaseous component was isolated, but could not be identified or allied with anything familiar to chemistry. Scarcely had the analysis been completed and its results given to the world, when the chemists who had undertaken the analysis, and also the investigators who had obtained the water, were all stricken down with an illness which differed in certain ways from the one that had been undergone by their Saharan predecessors. All the usual symptoms were presented; and co-incidentally there was a falling-out of all the hair on the heads, faces, limbs and bodies of those afflicted, till not even the finest down remained. Then the places where the hair had been were covered with a gray formation resembling mould. The formation, on being analyzed, was proven to consist of minute vegetable organisms which increased with remarkable fecundity and soon began to eat the skin and flesh beneath. No antiseptic could combat the ravages of the gray mould, and the victims died in atrocious agony within a few hours. It was surmised that the water must have given rise to these new symptoms, by some process of infection; but how the infection could have occurred was a mystery, since all manner of possible precautions had been taken in handling the water.

A little before the death of these hardy investigators, two singular astronomical discoveries were made. Lapham's theory that rays of an ultra-powerful type were being turned upon the earth from some ulterior source, had led to an intensive study of the neighboring planets, particularly of Mars and Venus, through the new telescopes with three hundred-inch reflectors, with which observatories in Colorado and the Spanish Pyrenees had been equipped. It was thought that the rays might be emanating from one of the planets. Mars, by this time, was definitely known to be inhabited, but little had been yet learned about Venus, on account of the cloudy envelope with which that world is surrounded. Now, under the close continual scrutiny to which it was subjected, three flashes of white light, occurring at intervals of seventy minutes and lasting for about ninety seconds, were seen to pierce the cloudy envelope, in a region not far from the equator of Venus. The three flashes emanated from the same spot. A little later during the same night, Dr. Malkin of the Colorado observatory, though all his interest was still centered upon the orb of Venus, now almost at meridian, was forced to observe within his field of vision a tiny satellite or asteroid which was apparently following the revolution of the earth. Observations were

made, leading to the sensational discovery that this new satellite was no more than a thousand miles distant, and was paralleling the movement of the earth in a position exactly above the state of Missouri! Calculations revealed that it was about two hundred feet in diameter.

Dr. Malkin's two discoveries were announced to the world, and were followed the next day by a report from the Pyrenean observatory, telling of another tiny body that had been located far in the south, directly above the vapor-shrouded region in northern Africa. In size, movement and distance from the earth, this body was similar to the American satellite. The two announcements were the cause of much public excitement, and many conjectures were made as to the origin and character of the two minute bodies, whose very positions made it natural for everyone to connect them at once with the geological phenomena in the subjacent areas. It remained, however, for Roger Lapham to predict that the three flashes on Venus, observed by Dr. Malkin on the same night as his discovery of the first body would soon be followed by the appearance of three new satellites, and also by three more storms of dust in different parts of the world.

"I believe," said Lapham, "that the satellites are mechanical spheres that have been discharged from Venus, and that they contain living beings and also apparatus for the creation and use of the destructive and recompositive rays that have brought about the singular manifestations in Africa and America. The flashes that Dr. Malkin saw were doubtless caused by the discharge of new spheres. And if Venus had been under continual observation by the new telescopes, two earlier flashes would have been seen, one preceding the atomic storm in Africa and the other the storm in America. I am at a loss to understand, however, why the two spheres were not observed long ago, since it is probable that they have been within telescopic range ever since the onset of the atomic storms."

IV

There was a great division of opinion among scientists, as well as among the general public, concerning the validity of Lapham's theory on the origin of the satellites; but no one felt any doubt regarding their problematic relation to the dust-storms and the new terrains. It was perceived that the two orbs were different in color, the African orb inclining to a ruddy tint and the American to a bluish tone. But suddenly,

under Dr. Malkin's observation, two nights after the initial discovery, this latter orb took on the reddish hue of its African fellow. Lapham, on hearing of this, went so far as to venture a surmise that the changing colors of the sphere had some connection with the nature of the rays that were being emitted, and that probably the bluish color was associated with a ray promoting the integration of mineral forms, and the reddish with one that had relation to the development of vegetable life.

"What I think is," he went on, "that the people of Venus are trying to establish in certain parts of our world, the geological, botanical and meteorological conditions that prevail in their own. The establishment of such conditions is no doubt preliminary to an attempt at invasion. The Venusians, it is likely, could no more exist under the conditions that are favorable to us, than we could under theirs. Therefore, before coming to earth, they must create for themselves a suitable environment in which their colonies can land. Certainly, the hot, steaming soil and vaporous atmosphere, found in the Sahara and in Missouri, are similar to those that characterize the planet Venus."

Though some were still incredulous, or unable to realize imaginatively what was taking place, a wave of terror inundated the world at the promulgation of this surmise. Hence-forward, the cool theorizing of Lapham and other scientists went on side by side with outbursts of frantic fear and of old-time religious hysteria on the part of the multitude. No one could know when and where the weird, extra-planetary menace would strike next, nor the possible scope of its operations; and the dread anticipation of this menace became a demoralizing and paralyzing force that affected more or less the field of nearly all human activities. The men of science, the astronomers, the chemists, the physicists, the inventors, the electricians, the medical brotherhood, were the only classes of society who, as a whole, went about their usual work with a quickening rather than a slackening of their faculties. Researches were rapidly begun in laboratories all over the world, to find medical agents that would be efficacious in fighting the new diseases caused by contact with the Venusian minerals, air, water, and vegetable forms; and in spite of the certain danger, many excursions were made into the vapor-hidden terrains to procure the needful substances for study in the various laboratories. The tale of resultant death and suffering was long and sad, and testified to the undauntable heroism of human scientists. Also,

a number of inventors, who had long sought the secret of a process by which molecules and atoms could be broken up and re-integrated on a large scale, now redoubled their efforts in the hope of enabling humanity to combat the probable conversion of wide areas of the earth into foreign atomic patterns.

Four days after the publication of Lapham's latest prophecy, there came the news of the three fresh storms he had predicted, at intervals of little more than an hour. The first storm was in Mesopotamia, and Baghdad and Mosul were both lost in the towering columns of infinitesimal powder. The Tigris continued to flow into the area of the storm, but on the southern side it instantly ceased to run and soon became a dry bed till its junction with the Euphrates. The second storm occurred in the Black Forest, in Germany, and the third on the huge pampas of the Argentine. A new satellite, of a sulphur-yellow hue, was located above Germany by the Pyrenean telescope, as well as by those of many other observatories. The satellite above Mesopotamia was too far east to be within range of European astronomers; but the astonomers of two observatories in the Andes were successful in locating the Argentine body, which was also of a sulphur-yellow hue. This color, it was thought, might be associated with the production and use of the disintegrative ray.

The progress of a growing international panic was of course accelerated by the announcement of the new storms and satellites. People fled in numberless hordes from the neighborhood of the three disturbances, and grave social and economic conditions were created by this exodus. Certain industries were well-nigh paralyzed, traffic by air and land and water was seriously disordered; and the stockmarket of the world was thrown into dire confusion, many standard stocks becoming suddenly worthless. Even at this early stage of the Venusian encroachment, there were many consequences of a far-reaching and oftentimes unexpected order, in all realms of mortal existence and effort.

All of the visible satellites were kept under close observation. On the night following the discovery of the sulphur-yellow orb above the Black Forest, it was found that the ruddy Saharan satellite had disappeared from its station; and no clue to its whereabouts could be obtained till the arrival of rumors from Timbuctoo and Ghadames, telling of a strange meteor that had fallen in broad daylight upon the region of massed vapors in El Juf. It had been watched by many desert tribesmen,

by several caravans, and had been visible at a great distance, falling with preternatural and deliberate slowness, in a vertical line. It had seemed to descend for nearly a minute before dropping into the vapors. Its color was a bright silver, it was round in form, and had not left the usual trail of flame that is made by a large meteor. The desert peoples looked upon it as a portent, foretelling the advent of Iblees and his demons.

"The first Venusian colony has landed," exclaimed Lapham, when these rumors were brought to him. "They have no doubt completed their evolutionary process, or have carried it to a degree that would render the African terrain inhabitable from their viewpoint."

While abject fear prevailed among the multitudes of humanity, and while scientists were engaged in eager speculation as to the nature of the Venusians, the rays employed by them, and the manner in which their spheres had been propelled through space and held in suspension above the earth, a number of new flashes were perceived on Venus by the vigilant astronomers of Colorado and Spain. No less than nine of these flashes were detected at the customary intervals on the same night, and on the following night there were nine more. Others, however, must have occurred during the daylight hours, for within five days, no less than thirty additional storms of atomic dust were reported from all over the world.

The areas of many were conterminate with the regions already affected, and were destined to extend enormously these regions; but many others were remotely scattered, and were to form independent neuclei for future manifestations. There were three storms in Australia, seven in Africa, six in Europe, six in Asia, five in the United States, and three in South America. Many more satellites, all of a sulphur-yellow hue, were located by astronomers above the realms of devastation that were being established. The destruction wrought was appalling in its scope, for a dozen great cities and hundreds of towns in thickly peopled regions were turned into cosmic powder by the disintegrating force. Berlin, Vienna, Florence, Teheran, Jerusalem, Kabul, Samarkand, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Paul and Pittsburgh, had become in an instant no more than memories. The Argentine tract was lengthening toward Buenos Aires; and the ravages in northern Africa had been extended as far as Lake Tchad, which had contributed a cloud of fine steam, twenty thousand feet in height, to the whirling tempest of minute sand-particles. Even amid the universal horror and confusion, it was noted that nearly

all the storms were in regions remote from the terrestrial seaboards. Lapham, on being appealed to for an explanation of this fact, made the following statement:

"The process that is being carried on must inevitably be slow and gradual, on account of its tremendous magnitude; and many years will doubtless be required for its completion. The Venusians have selected inland areas for the nuclei of the geological and climatic metamorphosis, because the new atmospheres created above such areas will less readily be subject to immediate modification by the terrene oceans. However, if I am not mistaken, the seas themselves will eventually be attacked and will be vaporized and recondensed with the addition of elements favorable to the maintenance of Venusian air. The full extension of this latter process, on account of the lethal gases inherent in such air, will prove fatal to all remaining animal, or perhaps even plant, life of terrene origin, even if the geological changes are left incomplete."

V

Absolute madness and pandemonium were the concomitants of the thirty new storms. From the vicinity of all the centers involved, unending throngs of people poured in all directions toward the littorals of five continents. The entire shipping of the world, both naval and aerial, was laden with men, women, and children who sought to flee the planetary peril; and those who were not fortunate enough to find room on any of the vessels, leapt into the surf or were driven from piers, cliffs and beaches by the pressure of the crowds behind. Innumerable thousands were drowned, while the streams of refugees came on day by day, night by night, utterly crazed with insensate terror, and more of the deadly satellites were appearing and more storms were being instituted. Town after town, city after city, countryside after countryside, was emptied of its inhabitants, hordes of whom were caught in the onset of additional upheavals. Heroic efforts were made by the police and military forces of all the nations, but not much could be done, beyond organizing many of the North American, European and Asiatic throngs for migration toward the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions.

In the midst of all this pandemonium and destruction, however, the laboratories of the world continued their investigations, though one by one many of them were lost in the molecular cataclysms. When the progress of the tracts of devastation became more and more extensive,

the chemists, inventors, and various other experimenters concluded that it would be folly to remain any longer at their present posts. It was thought, from the general distribution of the storms, that the Antarctic circle would be the last portion of the globe that the invader would attack; and the scientists of all countries, uniting in a common cause, made immediate preparation to remove their equipments and build laboratories in the heart of the polar plateau. The work of removal, through the aid of giant airliners, was completed in an amazingly short period of time, though there were certain casualties and losses through the passage of planes above fresh regions that were being assailed by destructive rays.

Enough provisions for several years were carried along, and of course the wives and families of the various investigators accompanied them, as well as many thousands of people who were needed for work of a less expert, but essential, order. Whole towns of laboratories, as well as other buildings, were erected amid the Antarctic wastes, while the air-liners returned to fetch more people and more supplies. The scientific colonies were joined by the passengers of hundreds of fugitive air-vessels that had been wandering above the seas; and soon a goodly remnant of every nation had found shelter behind the southern barriers of ice and snow. Something was also done to house and provision the hordes that had fled to the north; and as much communication as possible was kept up between the two streams of humanity.

Roger Lapham, who was now in a state of tolerable convalescence, was invited to join the colonies of investigators, and went south in one of the first air-liners. He had wished to lead another expedition into northern Africa, with the idea of again penetrating the Juf, where the supposed meteor had been seen to descend, but was finally dissuaded from this rash plan when word came that the African terrain was now surrounded on all sides by violent upheavals, one of which had destroyed Timbuctoo.

To the colonies about the southern pole, there came the daily news of how the fearful work of planetary destruction and reintegration was progressing, from radio operators who were brave enough to remain at their posts till an unresponding silence offered proof that they had been annihilated one by one with the realms in which their stations had stood. The Venusian soil and air, with outlying fringes of atomic dissolution, were spreading like a series of cancers through the five conti-

nents, through regions that were almost emptied of human life by this time. The heavens were filled with the tiny satellites of changing colors, a score of which had descended to earth and had not been seen to rise again. What their occupants might now be doing was a mystery that intrigued all of the scientific fraternity. They felt the need of definite knowledge regarding these alien life-forms, who were obviously possessed of a high type of intelligence, and who displayed mechanical resources and a mastery of physics to which humanity had not yet attained.

VI

A radio dispatch from a lonely village in southern Florida brought to the Antarctic laboratories the news that one of the silver spheres had been seen close at hand by human beings for the first time. An orange-grower who had refused to abandon his plantation at the flight of nearly all his neighbors, with his twelve-year-old son, who had remained with him, had observed the sphere flying toward them within a mile of the earth's surface, in a south-easterly direction. Apparently it had emerged from a partially converted tract involving Kentucky, Tennessee, and the northern borders of Alabama, where more than one of the spheres had already been known to land. The thing was flying slowly, at less than thirty miles an hour when first noticed; and it came gently to earth within three hundred yards of the orange-grower and his son, close to the edge of the orchard. The sphere seemed to be made of some whitish metal, was perfectly round, was at least two hundred feet in diameter, and had no visible projections anywhere. It resembled a miniature world or moon. When it approached the ground, a sort of framework consisting of four tripods of the same whitish metal, issued or unfolded from the sphere and served to support it when it came to rest. In this position, the lower part of the globe was no more than fifteen or twenty feet from the ground. A circular trap or man-hole opened in the bottom, and from this a stairway of metal steps was let down to earth. Seven creatures of an unearthly type descended the stairs forthwith and proceeded to examine their environment with all the air of a party of investigating scientists. They were perhaps four feet in height, with globular bodies; and they possessed three short legs and four extremely supple and jointless arms that issued from the side and back of smaller globes that were presumably their heads. These arms

were all long enough to reach the earth, and were used to a certain extent in locomotion and the maintenance of equilibrium. The creatures were either equipped with natural coverings like the shards of insects or else they wore some kind of armor or suiting made of red and green metals, for they glittered gorgeously in the sunlight. The orange-grove seemed to interest them greatly, for they broke off several boughs laden with ripe fruit and one of their number forthwith carried the boughs into the sphere, holding them aloft with two of his odd arms. The other six roamed about the country-side and vanished from view for awhile, returning in less than an hour with numerous plant specimens and also with pieces of furniture, human clothing, and tin cans, which they must have collected from the buildings on some deserted plantation. They re-entered the sphere, the metal stairway was drawn up, the trap was closed, and the great orb retracted its four tripods and flew away toward the ocean at an increased rate of speed that would soon bring it to the Bahama Islands. The orange-grower and his son, who had hid themselves behind a pile of empty lug-boxes and had scarcely dared to move for fear of attracting the Venusians' attention, now hurried to the local radio station, where the operator was still on duty, and sent a detailed report of what they had seen to the Antarctic laboratories.

A little later, the sphere was sighted from the Bahamas, but apparently it did not pause on any of these islands. Still later it was observed from Haiti, San Domingo, Martinique and the Barbadoes. Then it landed near Cayenne, where natives were captured by the Venusians and taken aboard the sphere. Then the thing continued its south-easterly flight and was seen far out at sea from Pernambuco. An hour afterward it was sighted from St. Helena, and then it changed its course and flew directly south. It passed above Tristan de Cunha and disappeared from human observation for two days. Then a biplane, flying from the Sandwich Islands to the Antarctic, found the great orb floating in the sea, and reported this fact to the united scientists. It was at once surmised that the occupants had fallen ill and were perhaps dead, or at least were no longer able to operate the propulsive and levitative mechanism.

"Immediate contact with our soil and atmosphere," said Lapham, "has no doubt proved as dangerous to these beings as our own excursions into terrains formed after a Venusian pattern were dangerous to us. Probably they were a group of scientists who desired to gather data

regarding terrestrial conditions, and were willing to chance the bodily peril."

Great excitement prevailed at the news of this find, and three armored planes with heavy guns and a supply of explosives were sent to watch the floating sphere. The huge orb was half-submerged in the water; and no sign of life, no movement other than that of natural drifting, was detectible. At length, after some hesitation, the crew of the planes decided to fire a seven-inch shell at the exposed portion, even at the risk of shattering machinery that might prove of intense interest and value to humanity. To the surprise of everyone, the shell made no impression on the sphere, beyond denting its side a little and increasing the speed of its drift along the waters. Finally it was resolved to tow the thing to land. On being approached, it revealed a number of small circular and oval windows, filled with semi-translucent materials of green, amber and violet. It was beached on one of the South Shetland Islands. After vain attempts with milder explosives, the trap in the bottom was blasted open with thorite, a terrible new compound of solidified gases, with which whole mountains had been shattered. Evidently, the metal of the sphere was stronger and harder than any substance found or invented by human beings, and it was likewise ascertained to be heavier.

When the fumes of the explosion had cleared away, several scientists entered the sphere by means of a ladder. Much damage had been done by the thorite, and certain highly intricate mechanisms around the trap were hopelessly ruined, to the extreme regret of the investigators. But the body of the sphere, and its contents, were still intact. The interior was divided into a great number of curious compartments with octagonal walls, and had probably accommodated more than a thousand of the interplanetary voyagers on its trip to the earth. A large room above the trap opened off into three others of equally capacious extent, filled with machinery whose use and method of operation could not easily be determined. In the center of each room there stood an enormous contrivance made of about fifty metal cubes all joined together by means of heavy quadrangular rods. These rods, in turn, were all correlated by single-stranded wires of varying thickness, forming a huge net. Three different metals, all unfamiliar, were noted in the composition of the cubes, rods and wires in the different rooms. From each of the central engineries there issued great curving tubes that ramified into scores of smaller

tubes arching the roof of the room in all directions and terminating in a series of no less than ten key-boards with many square and sphere-like knobs that were placed in a sort of elaborate rotation. The key-boards were attached to the walls. Before each of the circular windows, a device resembling a gigantic trumpet, with a hundred-angled lens of some glass-like material in its mouth, upreared from a tube that ran directly to the core of the cube-contrivance. The windows in each room were of a different color; and none of them, as well as none of the other windows in the sphere, was clearly permeable to human vision. On the outside of the sphere, opposite the large apartments, were found three disks that had a vague likeness to radio transmitters. All three were connected with the interior mechanism. It was imagined that these mechanisms were the source of the various rays employed in molecular dissolution and re-construction.

Also it was thought that the machinery wrecked by the thorite had served to propel and levitate the sphere.

After examining the apparatus in the large rooms, the scientists began an investigation of the smaller apartments, most of which had evidently been used as living-quarters. The beds and furniture were truly strange. The former were round, shallow tubs, lined with down-like materials of incredible resiliency, in which the globe-like bodies of the invaders had reposed, with their arms depending over the sides or coiled close to their trunks. There were eating-rooms where, in metal troughs divided into bowl-like compartments, were the remains of bizarre and unidentifiable foods. The ceilings of the rooms were all low, in proportion to the stature of their inmates, and the investigators were often compelled to stoop. Mechanical resource and even luxury were manifest on every hand, and there were many special devices, of unknown use and operation, that had probably ministered to the comfort of these odd beings.

After a number of rooms had been explored, a terrific stench was perceived, emanating through an open door. The bodies of six Venusians were found lying together where they had died, on the floor of what appeared to be a kind of laboratory. The place was filled with test-tubes of unfamiliar forms and materials and with all manner of scientific apparatus that aroused the interest and envy of the terrene investigators. The Venusians, when stricken, had manifestly been engaged in dissecting the body of one of the natives captured in Guiana, which

was stretched and tied down on an operating table. They had flayed the dead Indian from head to foot and had laid open his entire viscera. The corpse of his companion was never found; but the contents of a number of tubes, on analysis, were discovered to represent the sundry chemical elements of which the human body is composed. Other tubes contained, in solution, the elements of oranges and of other terrestrial fruits and plant-forms.

The dead Venusians were no longer clothed in the gorgeous green and red shards that the Florida planter had reported them as wearing. They were quite naked, with bodies and limbs of a dark-gray color. Their skin was without any sign of hair and was divided into rudimentary scales or plates, suggesting that they had evolved from a reptilian ancestor of some unearthly type. But nothing else in their anatomy was denotive of the reptile, or, indeed, of any terrene mammalian form. Their long, curving arms and round bodies with neckless, globular heads offered a vague hint of enormous tarantulas. The heads were equipped with two small, sucker-like mouths protruding from the lower part, and were without anything that suggested aural or nasal organs. They had a series of short, retractile appendages, arranged at regular intervals about their whole circumference above the beginning of the four arms. In the end of each appendage was an eye-ball with many crystal-like facets, and every eye-ball was of a different color and possessed a different formation and disposition of facets.

On re-examining the mass of wrecked machinery, the seventh Venusian was found. His body had been blown into fragments and buried under a heap of twisted tubes and wires and disks. Apparently, when stricken down by the same illness as the others, he had been guiding the course of the great orb, and, perhaps in falling or in the throes of his culminative agony, had stopped the working of the propulsive mechanism. It was learned that all the Venusians had been slain by certain streptococci, comparatively harmless to human beings, with which they had been infected through contact with the dead Indians.

The finding and opening of the sphere created supreme interest and even aroused much hope among the united scientists. It was felt that if the principle of the disintegrative and reconstructive rays could be ascertained, much might be done to reconquer earth, or, at least, to stem the Venusian encroachments. But the three mechanisms of cubes, tubes and wires, and their manifold key-boards, baffled all ingenuity and all the

mechanical science of the investigators for a long while. In the meantime, all those who had entered the sphere were smitten with unearthly diseases, and many died or were incapacitated for the remainder of their lives.

VII

Weeks and months went by and lengthened somehow into a year. The metamorphosis of earth had gone slowly on, though after a term of three months no more of the deadly satellites had appeared from outer space. Lapham and others conjectured that perhaps the invasion from Venus had been undertaken with the sole idea of relieving a problem of over-population and had ceased with the solving of this problem. More than two hundred of the metal spheres had fallen under observation; and allowing only a thousand occupants for each, it was estimated that at least two hundred thousand of the hostile foreign entities had taken up their abode on earth. After partially converting all the continents, many of the spheres, as Lapham had predicted, were now attacking the seas, and immense storms of vapor were reported daily from the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. Even in the polar realms, the inevitable climatic and atmospheric changes were being felt. The air was already warmer and moister, and deleterious elements were invading it at the same time, causing a gradual increase of pulmonary maladies among the survivors of the human race.

However, in spite of all this, the situation had begun to present a few hopeful factors. Invention, beneath the spur of dread necessity, had made new progress, and some valuable scientific discoveries had occurred. Machinery for the direct utilization and conservation of solar energy on a large scale had been perfected, and gigantic refractors had been devised, by which the heat of the sun could be magnified and concentrated. With these refractors, large areas of eternal ice and snow were melted away, revealing a rich soil that was now utilized for agriculture and horticulture. With the resultant amelioration of living-conditions, humanity proceeded to entrench itself firmly and with a fair degree of comfort, in regions that had once been deemed altogether uninhabitable.

Another valuable invention was a televisual instrument of range and power beyond anything hitherto devised, by which, without the aid of a transmitting-apparatus, sight-images could be picked up at any terren

distance. The use of a well-known ray in connection with this invention, made it possible to penetrate the vaporous air that enshrouded the new terrains, and to watch the habits, movements and daily life of the invaders. In this way, much astounding knowledge was soon acquired concerning them. It was found that they had built many cities, of a peculiar squat type of architecture, in which some of the buildings were septangular and octagonal and others were cylinder-like or spherical in form. The cities were wrought of synthetic minerals and metals, and all the houses were connected by tubes which were employed for purposes of traffic. Passengers, or any desired article, could be shot through them to a given point in a few instants. The buildings were illumined with lamps made of radio-active materials. The Venusians had also begun the growing of ultra-terrestrial fruits and vegetables and the breeding of certain creatures that were more like gigantic insects than animals. The vegetables were mainly fungoid, were of prodigious size and complicated structure, and many of them were grown in artificial caverns beneath the stimulation of green and amber rays produced from orb-like mechanisms.

The habits and customs of the Venusians differed, as might be imagined, from those of human beings. It was learned that they required very little sleep, two or three hours being enough for the majority of them. Also, they did not eat more than once in four days. After their meals, they were very torpid for half a day and did not engage in much activity. This, in the eyes of many scientists, gave support to the theory that they had evolved from a reptilian form. They were bi-sexual; and, in further support of the above theory, their young were hatched from eggs. Apart from the vegetables aforementioned, their foods consisted of a great number of substances formed through chemical processes of a recondite order. They had a sort of pictorial art, of a geometric type resembling cubism, and a written literature that seemed to be concerned mainly with scientific and mathematical problems. It could not be found that any religious customs or rites were observed among them; and their trend of mind was predominantly scientific and mechanical. They had evolved a purely materialistic civilization and had carried it to a point far beyond that of the earth-peoples. Their knowledge of chemistry, physics, mathematics and all other branches of science, was so profound that it seemed well-nigh supernatural. The sundry instruments, tools and engines that they employed were a source of perpetual marvel to

human inventors. There were optical instruments with a series of revolving lenses arranged above each other in metal frames, by means of which they apparently studied the heavens, in spite of the cloudy pall that hung forever upon their dominions. It was thought, however, that perhaps their myriad-faceted eyes were more or less televisual and could penetrate many materials impervious to human sight. In support of this theory, the semi-opaque windows of the fallen sphere were recalled.

That which evoked the keenest interest, was the type of mechanism they had invented for the amplification of all sorts of cosmic rays, of solar light itself and even the most delicate and imperceptible emanations in the spectrum of remote stars. By a process of repercussion and concentration, such rays were compelled to afford power beyond that of steam or electricity. The magnified vibrations were employed in the breaking-up of atoms and in their re-construction. The breaking-up, it was soon learned, could be done in more than one way, according to the intensity of the vibration used.

By means of the higher vibrations, a terrific explosion could be caused in destroying one or two molecules and reducing them to their ultimate electrons. But the milder vibrations caused a more slow and incomplete explosion, in which the atom-formation was partially destroyed. This latter process was the one that had been used as a preliminary to the transformation of the world. Smaller mechanisms of a kind similar to those in the silver globe were in common use among the invaders, and all their air-vehicles, industrial machinery and various other appliances were run with power derived from the explosion of atoms by amplified cosmic rays. By watching the actual employment of these mechanisms, human scientists learned how the machinery in the derelict sphere had been operated. Also, the changing colors of the satellites were explained, for it was perceived that the generation of the various rays was accompanied by the production of an aura of color about the transmitting mechanism. As Lapham had surmised, yellow was the tone of destruction, blue the tint of mineral evolution, and red the hue of vegetable growth.

The invisibility of the two first spheres for a long period, was likewise explained, when it was learned that the Venusians could use at will, in connection with the other vibrations, a vibration that neutralized these customary colors. Probably, through motives of natural caution, they had wished to remain invisible, till observation had con-

vinced them that nothing was to be feared from the world they were attacking.

Now, with the knowledge acquired from their monstrous foes, human inventors were able to create similar machinery for destroying atoms and for re-constructing them in any desired pattern. Enormous planes were built and were fitted with this machinery, and a war of titanic destruction soon began. The Venusian territories of Australia were attacked by a fleet of four hundred planes, which succeeded in annihilating several of the metal spheres, as well as two cities of the enemy, and turned many hundred miles of vapor-covered land into a seething chaos of primeval dust. The invaders were totally unprepared, for evidently they had despised their human enemies and had not thought it worth while to watch their movements and activities at any time. Before they could rally, the planes had passed on to the shores of Asia, and had inflicted much damage in the Mesopotamian terrain.

At the present time, after twenty years of a warfare more stupendous than anything in human history, a fair amount of territory has been regained, in spite of terrible reprisals on the part of the Venusians. But the issue is still in doubt, and may not be decided for hundreds of years to come. The invaders are well-entrenched, and if re-enforcements should ever arrive from Venus, the tide may turn against humanity. The real hope lies in their limited number, and in the fact that they are not thriving physically in their new environment and are slowly becoming sterile as well as subject to a multitude of maladies, due, doubtless, to the incomplete conversion of the earth and its atmosphere and the tendency of tellurian atom-structures to re-establish themselves, even apart from the re-integration carried on by scientists. On the other hand, the vitiation of our seas and air by the introduction of deadly gases is not favorable to human life, and the powers of medical science are not yet able to cope fully with the unusual problems offered.

Roger Lapham, whose clear, logical brain and prophetic insight have always been a source of inspiration to his fellows, has died lately and is mourned by all. But his spirit still prevails; and even if humanity should lose in the long and catastrophic warfare with an alien foe, the tale of mortal existence and toil and suffering will not have been told in vain.

PHOENIX

Rodis and Hilar had climbed from their natal caverns to the top chamber of the high observatory tower. Pressed close together, for warmth as well as love, they stood at an eastern window looking forth on hills and valleys dim with perennial starlight. They had come up to watch the rising of the sun: that sun which they had never seen except as an orb of blackness, occluding the zodiacal stars in its course from horizon to horizon.

Thus their ancestors had seen it for millenniums. By some freak of cosmic law, unforeseen, and inexplicable to astronomers and physicists, the sun's cooling had been comparatively sudden, and the earth had not suffered the long-drawn complete desiccation of such planets as Mercury and Mars. Rivers, lakes, seas, had frozen solid; and the air itself had congealed, all in a term of years historic rather than geologic. Millions of the earth's inhabitants had perished, trapped by the glacial ice, the centigrade cold. The rest, armed with all the resources of science, had found time to entrench themselves against the cosmic night in a world of ramified caverns, dug by atomic excavators far below the surface.

Here, by the light of artificial orbs, and the heat drawn from the planet's still-molten depths, life went on much as it had done in the outer world. Trees, fruits, grasses, grains, vegetables, were grown in isotope-stimulated soil or hydroroponic gardens, affording food, renewing a breathable atmosphere. Domestic animals were kept; and birds flew; and insects crawled or fluttered. The rays considered necessary for life

and health were afforded by the sunbright lamps that shone eternally in all the caverns.

Little of the old science was lost; but, on the other hand, there was now little advance. Existence had become the conserving of a fire menaced by inexorable night. Generation by generation a mysterious sterility had lessened the numbers of the race from millions to a few thousands. As time went on, a similar sterility began to affect animals; and even plants no longer flourished with their first abundance. No biologist could determine the cause with certainty.

Perhaps man, as well as other terrestrial life-forms, was past his prime, and had begun to undergo collectively the inevitable senility that comes to the individual. Or perhaps, having been a surface-dweller throughout most of his evolution, he was inadaptable to the cribbed and prisoned life, the caverned light and air; and was dying slowly from the deprivation of things he had almost forgotten.

Indeed, the world that had once flourished beneath a living sun was little more than a legend now, a tradition preserved by art and literature and history. Its beetling Babelian cities, its fecund hills and plains, were swathed impenetrably in snow and ice and solidified air. No living man had gazed upon it, except from the night-bound towers maintained as observatories.

Still, however, the dreams of men were often lit by primordial memories, in which the sun shone on rippling waters and waving trees and grass. And their waking hours were sometimes touched by an undying nostalgia for the lost earth. . . .

Alarmed by the prospect of racial extinction, the most able and brilliant savants had conceived a project that was seemingly no less desperate than fantastic. The plan, if executed, might lead to failure or even to the planet's destruction. But all the necessary steps had now been taken toward its launching.

It was of this plan that Rodis and Hilar spoke, standing clasped in each other's arms, as they waited for the rising of the dead sun.

"And you must go?" said Rodis, with averted eyes and voice that quavered a little.

"Of course. It is a duty and an honor. I am regarded as the foremost of the younger atomicists. The actual placing and timing of the bombs will devolve largely upon me."

"But—are you sure of success? There are so many risks, Hilar." The

girl shuddered, clasping her lover with convulsive tightness.

"We are not sure of anything," Hilar admitted. "But, granting that our calculations are correct, the multiple charges of fissionable materials, including more than half the solar elements, should start chain-reactions that will restore the sun to its former incandescence. Of course, the explosion may be too sudden and too violent, involving the nearer planets in the formation of a nova. But we do not believe that this will happen —since an explosion of such magnitude would require instant disruption of all the sun's elements. Such disruption should not occur without a starter for each separate atomic structure. Science has never been able to break down all the known elements. If it had been, the earth itself would undoubtedly have suffered destruction in the old atomic wars."

Hilar paused, and his eyes dilated, kindling with a visionary fire.

"How glorious," he went on, "to use for a purpose of cosmic renovation the deadly projectiles designed by our forefathers only to blast and destroy. Stored in sealed caverns, they have not been used since men abandoned the earth's surface so many millenniums ago. Nor have the old spaceships been used either. . . . An interstellar drive was never perfected; and our voyagings were always limited to the other worlds of our own system—none of which was inhabited, or inhabitable. Since the sun's cooling and darkening, there has been no object in visiting any of them. But the ships too were stored away. And the newest and speediest one, powered with anti-gravity magnets, has been made ready for our voyage to the sun."

Rodis listened silently, with an awe that seemed to have subdued her misgivings, while Hilar continued to speak of the tremendous project upon which he, with six other chosen technicians, was about to embark. In the meanwhile, the black sun rose slowly into heavens thronged with the cold ironic blazing of innumerable stars, among which no planet shone. It blotted out the sting of the Scorpion, poised at that hour above the eastern hills. It was smaller but nearer than the igneous orb of history and legend. In its center, like a Cyclopean eye, there burned a single spot of dusky red fire, believed to mark the eruption of some immense volcano amid the measureless and cinder-blackened landscape.

To one standing in the ice-bound valley below the observatory, it would have seemed that the tower's litten window was a yellow eye that stared back from the dead earth to that crimson eye of the dead sun.

"Soon," said Hilar, "you will climb to this chamber—and see the morning that none has seen for a century of centuries. The thick ice

will thaw from the peaks and valleys, running in streams to remolten lakes and oceans. The liquefied air will rise in clouds and vapors, touched with the spectrum-tinted splendor of the light. Again, across earth, will blow the winds of the four quarters; and grass and flowers will grow, and trees burgeon from tiny saplings. And man, the dweller in closed caves and abysses, will return to his proper heritage."

"How wonderful it all sounds," murmured Rodis. "But . . . you will come back to me?"

"I will come back to you . . . in the sunlight," said Hilar.

The space-vessel *Phosphor* lay in a huge cavern beneath that region which had once been known as the Atlas Mountains. The cavern's mile-thick roof had been partly blasted away by atomic disintegrators. A great circular shaft slanted upward to the surface, forming a mouth in the mountain-side through which the stars of the Zodiac were visible. The prow of the *Phosphor* pointed at the stars.

All was now ready for its launching. A score of dignitaries and savants, looking like strange ungainly monsters in suits and helmets worn against the spatial cold that had invaded the cavern, were present for the occasion. Hilar and his six companions had already gone aboard the *Phosphor* and had closed its air-locks.

Inscrutable and silent behind their metalloid helmets, the watchers waited. There was no ceremony, no speaking or waving of farewells; nothing to indicate that a world's destiny impended on the mission of the vessel.

Like mouths of fire-belching dragons the stern-rockets flared, and the *Phosphor*, like a wingless bird, soared upward through the great shaft and vanished.

Hilar, gazing through a rear port, saw for a few moments the lamp-bright window of that tower in which he had stood so recently with Rodis. The window was a golden spark that swirled donward in abysses of devouring night—and was extinguished. Behind it, he knew, his beloved stood watching the *Phosphor's* departure. It was a symbol, he mused . . . a symbol of life, of memory . . . of the suns themselves . . . of all things that flash briefly and fall into oblivion.

But such thoughts, he felt, should be dismissed. They were unworthy of one whom his fellows had appointed as a light-bringer, a Prometheus who should rekindle the dead sun and re-lumine the dark world.

There were no days, only hours of eternal starlight, to measure the time in which they sped outward through the void. The rockets, used

for initial propulsion, no longer flamed astern; and the vessel flew in darkness, except for the gleaming Argus eyes of its ports, drawn now by the mighty gravitational drag of the blind sun.

Test-flights had been considered unnecessary for the *Phosphor.* All its machinery was in perfect condition; and the mechanics involved were simple and easily mastered. None of its crew had ever been in extraterrestrial space before; but all were well-trained in astronomy, mathematics, and the various techniques essential to a voyage between worlds. There were two navigators; one rocket-engineer; and two engineers who would operate the powerful generators, charged with a negative magnetism reverse to that of gravity, with which they hoped to approach, circumnavigate, and eventually depart in safety from an orb enormously heavier than the system's nine planets merged into one. Hilar and his assistant, Han Joas, completed the personnel. Their sole task was the timing, landing, and distribution of the bombs.

All were descendants of a mixed race with Latin, Semitic, Hamitic, and negroid ancestry: a race that had dwelt, before the sun's cooling, in countries south of the Mediterranean, where the former deserts had been rendered fertile by a vast irrigation-system of lakes and canals.

This mixture, after so many centuries of cavern life, had produced a characteristically slender, well-knit type, of short or medium stature and pale olive complexion. The features were often of negroid softness; the general physique was marked by a delicacy verging upon decadence.

To an extent surprising, in view of the vast intermediate eras of historic and geographic change, this people had preserved many preatomic traditions and even something of the old classic Mediterranean cultures. Their language bore distinct traces of Latin, Greek, Spanish and Arabic.

Remnants of other peoples, those of sub-equatorial Asia and America, had survived the universal glaciation by burrowing underground. Radio communication had been maintained with these peoples till within fairly recent times, and had then ceased. It was believed that they had died out, or had retrograded into savagery, losing the civilization to which they had once attained.

Hour after hour, intervaled only by sleep and eating, the *Phosphor* sped onward through the black unvarying void. To Hilar, it seemed at times that they flew merely through a darker and vaster cavern whose remote walls were spangled by the stars as if by radiant orbs. He had

thought to feel the overwhelming vertigo of unbottomed and undirectioned space. Instead, there was a weird sense of circumscription by the ambient night and emptiness, together with a sense of cyclic repetition, as if all that was happening had happened many times before and must recur often through endless future kalpas.

Had he and his companions gone forth in former cycles to the relighting of former perished suns? Would they go forth again, to rekindle suns that would flame and die in some posterior universe? Had there always been, would there always be, a Rodis who awaited his return?

Of these thoughts he spoke only to Han Joas, who shared something of his innate mysticism and his trend toward cosmic speculation. But mostly the two talked of the mysteries of the atom and its typhonic powers, and discussed the problems with which they would shortly be confronted.

The ship carried several hundred disruption bombs, many of untried potency: the unused heritage of ancient wars that had left chasm scars and lethal radioactive areas, some a thousand miles or more in extent, for the planetary glaciers to cover. There were bombs of iron, calcium, sodium, helium, hydrogen, sulphur, potassium, magnesium, copper, chromium, strontium, barium, zinc: elements that had all been anciently revealed in the solar spectrum. Even at the apex of their madness, the warring nations had wisely refrained from employing more than a few such bombs at any one time. Chain-reactions had sometimes been started; but, fortunately, had died out.

Hilar and Han Joas hoped to distribute the bombs at intervals over the sun's entire circumference; preferably in large deposits of the same elements as those of which they were composed. The vessel was equipped with radar apparatus by which the various elements could be detected and located. The bombs would be timed to explode with as much simultaneity as possible. If all went well, the *Phosphor* would have fulfilled its mission and traveled most of the return distance to earth before the explosions occurred.

It had been conjectured that the sun's interior was composed of still-molten magma, covered by a relatively thin crust: a seething flux of matter that manifested itself in volcanic activities. Only one of the volcanoes was visible from earth to the naked eye; but numerous others had been revealed to telescopic study. Now, as the *Phosphor* drew near

to its destination, the others flamed out on the huge, slowly rotating orb that had darkened a fourth of the ecliptic and had blotted Libra, Scorpio and Sagittarius wholly from view.

For a long time it had seemed to hang above the voyagers. Now, suddenly, as if through some prodigious legerdemain, it lay beneath them: a monstrous, ever-broadening disk of ebon, eyed with fiery craters, veined and spotted and blotched with unknown pallid radioactives. It was like the buckler of some macrososmic giant of the night, who had entrenched himself in the abyss lying between the worlds.

The *Phosphor* plunged toward it like a steel splinter drawn by some tremendous lodestone.

Eash member of the crew had been trained before-hand for the part he was to play; and everything had been timed with the utmost precision. Sybal and Samac, the engineers of the anti-gravity magnets, began to manipulate the switches that would build up resistance to the solar drag. The generators, bulking to the height of three men, with induction-coils that suggested some colossal Laocoon, could draw from cosmic space a negative force capable of counteracting many earth-gravities. In past ages they had defied easily the pull of Jupiter; and the ship had even coasted as near to the blazing sun as its insulation and refrigeration systems would safely permit. Therefore it seemed reasonable to expect that the voyagers could accomplish their purpose of approaching closely to the darkened globe, of circling it, and pulling away when the disruption-charges had all been planted.

A dull, subsonic vibration, felt rather than heard, began to emanate from the magnets. It shook the vessel, ached in the voyagers' tissues. Intently, with anxiety unbetrayed by their impassive features, they watched the slow, gradual building-up of power shown by gauge-dials on which giant needles crept like horologic hands, registering the reversed gravities one after one, till a drag equivalent to that of fifteen Earths had been neutralized. The clamp of the solar gravitation, drawing them on with projectile-like velocity, crushing them to their seats with relentless increase of weight, was loosened. The needles crept on . . . more slowly now . . . to sixteen . . . to seventeen . . . and stopped. The *Phosphor's* fall had been retarded but not arrested. And the switches stood at their last notch.

Sybal spoke, in answer to the unuttered questions of his companions. "Something is wrong. Perhaps there has been some unforeseen deteri-

oration of the coils, in whose composition strange and complex alloys were used. Some of the elements may have been unstable—or have developed instability through age. Or perhaps there is some interfering unknown force, born of the sun's decay. At any rate, it is impossible to build more power toward the twenty-seven antigravities we will require close to the solar surface."

Samac added: "The decelerative jets will increase our resistance to nineteen anti-gravities. It will still be far from enough, even at our present distance."

"How much time have we?" inquired Hilar, turning to the navigators, Calaf and Caramod.

The two conferred and calculated.

"By using the decelerative jets, it will be two hours before we reach the sun," announced Calaf finally.

As if his announcement had been an order, Eibano, the jet-engineer, promptly jerked the levers that fired to full power the reversing rockets banked in the *Phosphor's* nose and sides. There was a slight further deceleration of their descent, a further lightening of the grievious weight that oppressed them. But the *Phosphor* still plunged irreversibly sunward.

Hilar and Han Joas exchanged a glance of understanding and agreement. They rose stiffly from their seats, and moved heavily toward the magazine, occupying fully half the ship's interior, in which the hundreds of disruption-bombs were racked. It was unnecessary to announce their purpose; and no one spoke either in approval or demur.

Hilar opened the magazine's door; and he and Han Joas paused on the threshold, looking back. They saw for the last time the faces of their fellow-voyagers, expressing no other emotion than resignation, vignetted, as it were, on the verge of destruction. Then they entered the magazine, closing its door behind them.

They set to work methodically, moving back to back along a narrow aisle between the racks in which the immerse ovoid bombs were piled in strict order according to their respective elements. Because of various coördinated dials and switches involved, it was a matter of minutes to prepare a single bomb for the explosion. Therefore Hilar and Han Joas, in the time at their disposal, could do no more than set the timing and detonating mechanism of one bomb of each element. A great chronometer, ticking at the magazine's farther end, enabled them to accomplish

this task with precision. The bombs were thus timed to explode simultaneously, detonating the others through chain-reaction, at the moment when the *Phosphor* should touch the sun's surface.

The solar pull, strengthening as the *Phosphor* fell to its doom, had now made their movements slow and difficult. It would, they feared, immobilize them before they could finish preparing a second series of bombs for detonation. Laboriously, beneath the burden of a weight already trebled, they made their way to seats that faced a reflector in which the external cosmos was imaged.

It was an awesome and stupendous scene on which they gazed. The sun's globe had broadened vastly, filling the nether heavens. Half-seen, a dim unhorizoned landscape, fitfully lit by the crimson far-sundered flares of volcanoes, by bluish zones and patches of strange radio-active minerals, it deepened beneath them abysmally disclosing mountains that would have made the Himalayas seem like hillocks, revealing chasms that might have engulfed asteroids and planets.

At the center of this Cyclopean landscape burned the great volcano that had been called Hephaestus by astronomers. It was the same volcano watched by Hilar and Rodis from the observatory window. Tongues of flame a hundred miles in length arose and licked skyward from a crater that seemed the mouth of some ultramundane hell.

Hilar and Han Joas no longer heard the chronometer's portentous ticking, and had no eyes for the watching of its ominous hands. Such watching was needless now: there was nothing more to be done, and nothing before them but eternity. They measured their descent by the broadening of the dim solar plain, the leaping into salience of new mountains, the deepening of new chasms and gulfs in the globe that had now lost all semblance of a sphere.

It was plain now that the *Phosphor* would fall directly into the flaming and yawning crater of Hephaestus. Faster and faster it plunged, heavier grew the piled chains of gravity that giants could not have lifted. . . .

At the very last, the reflector of which Hilar and Han Joas peered was filled entirely by the tongued volcanic fires that enveloped the *Phosphor.*

Then, without eyes to see or ears to apprehend, they were part of the pyre from which the sun, like a Phoenix, was reborn.

Rodis, climbing to the tower, after a period of fitful sleep and troublous dreams, saw from its window the rising of the rekindled orb.

It dazzled her, though its glory was half-dimmed by rainbow-colored mists that fumed from the icy mountain-tops. It was a sight filled with marvel and with portent. Thin rills of downward-threading water had already begun to fret the glacial armor on slopes and scarps; and later they would swell to cataracts, laying bare the buried soil and stone. Vapors, that seemed to flow and fluctuate on renascent winds, swam sunward from lakes of congealed air at the valley's bottom. It was a visible resumption of the elemental life and activity so long suspended in hibernal night. Even through the tower's insulating walls, Rodis felt the solar warmth that later would awaken the seeds and spores of plants that had lain dormant for cycles.

Her heart was stirred to wonder by the spectacle. But beneath the wonder was a great numbness and a sadness like unmelting ice. Hilar, she knew, would never return to her—except as a ray of the light, a spark of the vital heat, that he had helped to relumine. For the nonce, there was irony rather than comfort in the memory of his promise: "I will come back to you—in the sunlight."

THE NECROMANTIC TALE

IN ONE sense, it is a mere truism to speak of the evocative power of words. The olden efficacy of subtly woven spells, of magic formulas and incantations, has long become a literary metaphor; though the terrible reality which once underlay and may still underlie such concepts has been forgotten. However, the necromancy of language is more than a metaphor to Sir Roderick Hagdon: the scars of fire on his ankles are things which no one could possibly regard as having their origin in a figure of speech.

Sir Roderick Hagdon came to his title and his estate with no definite expectation of inheriting them, nor any first-hand knowledge of the sort of life and surroundings entailed by his inheritance. He had been born in Australia; and though he had known that his father was the younger brother of Sir John Hagdon, he had formed only the vaguest idea of the ancestral manor; and the interest that he felt therein was even vaguer. His surprize was little short of consternation when the deaths of his father, of Sir John Hagdon and Sir John's only son, all occurring within less than a year, left clear his own succession and brought a letter from the family lawyers informing him of this fact—which otherwise might have escaped his attention. His mother, too, was dead; and he was unmarried; so, leaving the Australian sheep-range in charge of a competent overseer, he had sailed immediately for England to assume his hereditary privileges.

It was a strange experience for him; and, strangest of all, in view of

the fact that he had never before visited England, was the inexplicable feeling of familiarity aroused by his first sight of the Hagdon manor. He seemed to know the farm-lands, the cottages of the tenants, the wood of ancient oaks with their burdens of Druidic mistletoe, and the old manor-house half hidden among gigantic yews, as if he had seen them all in some period that was past recollection. Being of an analytic trend, he attributed all this to that imperfect sitmultaneousness in the action of the brain-hemispheres by which psychologists account for such phenomena. But the feeling remained and grew upon him; and he yielded more and more to its half-sinister charm, as he explored his property and delved in the family archives. He felt also an unexpected kinship with his ancestors—a feeling which had lain wholly dormant during his Australian youth. Their portraits, peering upon him from the never-dissipated shadows of the long hall wherein they hung, were like well-known faces.

The manor-house, it was said, had been built in the reign of Henry the Seventh. It was mossed and lichened with antiquity; and there was a hint of beginning dilapidation in the time-worn stone of the walls. The formal garden had gone a little wild from neglect; the trimmed hedges and trees had taken on fantastic sprawling shapes; and evil, poisonous weeds had invaded the flower-beds. There were statues of cracked marble and verdigris-eaten bronze amid the shrubbery; there were fountains that had long ceased to flow; and dials on which the foliage-intercepted sun no longer fell. About it all there hung an air of shadow-laden time and subtle decadence. But though he had never known anything but the primitive Australian environment, Hagdon found himself quite at home in this atmosphere of Old World complexities—an atmosphere that was made from the dissolving phantoms of a thousand years, from the breathings of dead men and women, from loves and hates that had gone down to dust. Contrary to his anticipations, he felt no nostalgia whatever for the remote land of his birth and upbringing.

Sir Roderick came to love the sunless gardens and the overtowering yews. But, above and beyond these, he was fascinated by the manor-house itself, by the hall of ancestral portraits and the dark, dusty library in which he found an amazing medley of rare tomes and manuscripts. There were many first editions of Elizabethan poets and dramatists; and mingled with these in a quaint disorder, were antique books on astrology and conjuration, on demonism and magic. Sir Rodereck shivered a

little, he knew not why, as he turned the leaves of some of these latter volumes, from whose ancient vellum and parchment arose to his nostrils an odor that was like the mustiness of tombs. He closed them hastily; and the first editions were unable to detain him; but he lingered long over certain genealogies and manuscript records of the Hagdon family, filled with a strange eagerness to learn as much as he could concerning these shadowy forbears of his.

In going through the records, he was struck by the brevity of the mention accorded to a former Sir Roderick Hagdon, who had lived in the early Seventeenth Century. All other members of the direct line had been dealt with at some length; their deeds, their marriages, and their various claims to distinction (often in the rôle of soldiers or scholars) were usually set forth with a well-nigh vainglorious unction. But concerning Sir Roderick, nothing more was given than the bare dates of his birth and death, and the fact that he was the father of one Sir Ralph Hagdon. No mention whatever was made of his wife.

Though there was no obvious reason for more than a passing surmise, the present Sir Roderick wondered and speculated much over these singular and perhaps sinister omissions. His curiosity increased when he found that there was no portrait of Sir Roderick in the gallery, and none of his mysterious unnamed lady. There was not even a vacant place between the pictures of Sir Roderick's father and son, to indicate that there ever had been a portrait. The new baronet determined to solve the mystery, if possible: an element of vague but imperative disquietude was now mingled with his curiosity. He could not have analyzed his feelings; but the life and fate of this unknown ancestor seemed to take on for him a special significance, a concern that was incomprehensibly personal and intimate.

At times he felt that his obsession with this problem was utterly ridiculous and uncalled-for. Nevertheless, he ransacked the manor-house in the hope of finding some hidden record; and he questioned the servants, the tenants and the people of the parish to learn if there were any legendry concerning his namesake. The manor-house yielded nothing more to his search; and his inquiries met with blank faces and avowals of ignorance: no one seemed to have heard of this elusive Seventeenth Century baronet.

At last, from the family butler, James Wharton, an octogenarian who had served three generations of Hagdons, Sir Roderick obtained the clue

which he sought. Wharton, who was now on the brink of senility, and had grown forgetful and taciturn, was seemingly ignorant as the rest; but one day, after repeated questioning, he remembered that he had been told in his youth of a secret closet behind one of the book-shelves, in which certain manuscripts and heirlooms had been locked away several hundred years before; and which, for some unknown reason, no Hagdon had ever opened since that time. Here, he suggested, something might be found that would serve to illumine the dark gap in the family history. There was a cunning, sardonic gleam in his rheumy eyes as he came forth with this tardy piece of information, and Sir Roderick wondered if the old man were not possessed of more genealogical lore than he was willing to admit. All at once, he conceived the disquieting idea that perhaps he was on the verge of some abominable discovery, on the threshold of things that had been forgotten because they were too dreadful for remembrance.

However, he did not hesitate: he was conscious of a veritable compulsion to learn whatever could be learned. The bookcase indicated by the half-senile butler was one which contained most of the volumes on demonism and magic. It was now removed; and Sir Roderick went over the uncovered wall inch by inch. After much futile fumbling, he located and pressed a hidden spring, and the door of the sealed room swung open.

It was little more than a cupboard, though a man could have concealed himself within it in time of need. Doubtless it had been built primarily for some such purpose. From out its narrow gloom the moldiness of dead ages rushed upon Sir Roderick, together with the ghosts of queer exotic perfumes such as might have poured from the burning of unholy censers in Satanic rites. It was an effluence of mystery and of evil. Within, there were several ponderous brazen-bound volumes of mediaeval date, a thin manuscript of yellowing parchment, and two portraits whose faces had been turned to the wall, as if it were unlawful for even the darkness of the sealed door to behold them.

Sir Roderick brought the volumes, the manuscript and the portraits forth to the light. The pictures, which he examined first, represented a man and woman who were both in the bloom of life. Both were attired in Seventeenth Century costumes; and the new Sir Roderick did not doubt for a moment that they were the mysterious couple concerning whom the family records were so reticent.

He thrilled with a strange excitement, with a feeling of some momentous revelation that he could not wholly comprehend, as he looked upon them. Even at a glance, he saw the singular resemblance of the first Sir Roderick to himself—a likeness otherwise unduplicated in the family, which tended to an almost antinomian type. There were the same falcon-like features, the same pallor of brow and cheek, the same semi-morbid luster of eyes, the same bloodless lips that seemed to be carven from a marble that had also been chiselled for the long hollow eyelids. The majority of the Hagdons were broad and sanguine and ruddy; but in these two, a darker strain had repeated itself across the centuries. The main difference was in the expression, for the look of the first Sir Roderick was that of a man who has given himself with a passionate devotion to all things evil and corrupt; who has gone down to damnation through some inevitable fatality of his own being.

Sir Roderick gazed on the picture with a fascination that was partly horror, and partly the stirring of emotions which he could not have named. Then he turned to the woman, and a wild agitation overmastered him before the sullen-smiling mouth and the malign oval of the lovely cheeks. She, too, was evil, and her beauty was that of Lilith. She was like some crimson-lipped and honey-scented flower that grows on the brink of hell; but Sir Roderick knew, with the terror and fearful rapture of one who longs to fling himself from a precipice, that here was the one woman he might have loved, if haply he had known her. Then, in a moment of reeling and whirling confusion, it seemed to him that he *had* known and loved her, though he could not remember when or where.

The feeling of eery confusion passed; and Sir Roderick began to examine the brass-bound volumes. They were written in a barbarous decadent Latin, and dealt mainly with methods and formulas for the evocation of such demons as Acheront, Amaimon, Asmodi and Ashtoreth, together with innumerable others. Sir Roderick shuddered at the curious drawings with which they were illuminated; but they did not detain him long. With a thrill of actual trepidation, like one who is about to enter some awful annd unhallowed place, he took up the manuscript of yellowing parchment.

It was late afternoon when he began to read; and rays of dusty amber were slanting through the low panes of the library windows. As he read on, he gave no heed to the sinking of the light; and the last words were

plain as runes of fire when he finished his perusal in the dusk. He closed his eyes, and could still see them:

> "And Sir Roderick Hagdonne was now deemed a moste infamous warlocke, and hys Ladye Elinore a nefandous witche. . . . And both were burned at the stake on Hagdonne Common for their crimes against God and man. And their sorcerous deedes and practices were thought so foule a blotte on ye knighthoode of England, that no man speaks thereof, and no grandam tells the tale to the children at her knee. So, by God Hys mercy, the memorie of thys foulnesse shall haply be forgotten; for surely itte were an ill thing that such should be recalled."

Then, at the very bottom of the page, there was a brief, mysterious footnote in a finer hand than the rest:

> "There be those amid the thronge who deemed that they saw Sir Rodericke vanish when the flames leaped high; and thys, if true, is the moste damnable proof of hys compact and hys commerce with the Evill One."

Sir Roderick sat for a long while in the thickening twilight. He was unstrung, he was abnormally shaken and distraught by the biographical record he had just read—a record that had been written by some unknown hand in a bygone century. It was not pleasant for any man to find a tale so dreadful amid the archives of his family history. But the fact that the narrative concerned the first Sir Roderick and his Lady Elinor was hardly enough to account for all the spiritual turmoil and horror into which he was plunged. Somehow, in a way that was past analysis, that was more intimate than his regard for the remote blot on the Hagdon name, he felt that the thing concerned himself also. A terrible nervous perturbation possessed him, his very sense of identity was troubled, he was adrift in a sea of abominable confusion, of disoriented thoughts and capsizing memories. In this peculiar state of mind, by an automatic impulse, he lit the floor-lamp beside his chair and began to re-read the manuscript.

Almost in the casual manner of a modern tale, the story opened with an account of Sir Roderick's first meeting, at the age of twenty-three, with Elinor D'Avenant, who was afterward to become his wife.

This time, as he read, a peculiar hallucination seized the new baronet. It seemed to him that the words of the old writing had begun to waver and change beneath his scrutiny; that, under the black lines of script on yellowing parchment, the picture of an actual place was forming. The

page expanded, the letters grew dim and gigantic; they seemed to fade out in midair, and the picture behind them was no longer a picture, but the very scene of the narrative. As if the wording were a necromantic spell, the room about him had vanished like the chamber of a dream; and he stood in the open sunlight of a windy moor. Bees were humming around him, and the scent of heather was in his nostrils. His consciousness was indescribably dual; somewhere, he knew, one part of his brain was still reading the ancient record; but the rest of his personality had become identified with that of the first Sir Roderick Hagdon. Inevitably, with no surprize or astonishment, he found himself living in a bygone age, with the perceptions and memories of an ancestor who was long dead.

> "Now Sir Roderick Hagdonne, being in the flower of hys youth, became instantlie enamoured of the beauteous Elinore D'Avenant, whenas he mette her of an Aprile morn on Hagdonne heathe."

Sir Roderick saw that he was not alone on the moor. A woman was coming toward him along the narrow path amid the heather. Though clad in the conventional gown and bodice of the period, she was somehow foreign and exotic to that familiar English landscape. She was the woman of the portrait which, in a later life, as another Sir Roderick, he had found in a sealed room of the manor-house. (But this, like much else, he had now forgotten.) Walking with a languid grace amid the homely blossoms of the heath, her beauty was like that of some opulent and sinister lily from Saracenic lands. He thought that he had never seen any one half so strange and lovely.

He stood to one side in the stiff growth, and bowed before her with a knightly courtesy as she passed. She nodded slightly in acknowledgment, and gave him an unfathomable smile and an oblique flash of her dark eyes. From that time, Sir Roderick was her slave and her devotee: he stared after her as she disappeared on the curving slope, and felt the mounting of an irresistible flame in his heart, and the stirring of hot desires and curiosities. He seemed to inhale the spice of a languorous alien perfume with every breath of the homeland air, as he walked onward, musing with ingenuous rapture on the dark, enigmatic beauty of the face he had seen.

Now, in that queer necromantic dream, Sir Roderick seemed to live, or re-live, the events of an entire lustrum. Somewhere, in another existence, another self was conning briefly the paragraphs which detailed these events; but of this he was conscious only at long intervals, and

then vaguely. So complete was his immersion in the progress of the tale (as if he had drunk of that Lethe which alone makes it possible to live again) that he was untroubled by any prevision of a future known to the Sir Roderick who sat re-reading an old manuscript. Even as it was written, he returned from the moor to Hagdon Hall with the vision of a fair stranger in his heart; he made inquiries concerning her, and learned that she was the daughter of Sir John D'Avenant, who had but recently received his knighthood for diplomatic services, and had now taken up his abode on the state near Hagdon that went with his title. Sir Roderick was now doubly impelled to call on his new neighbors; and his first visit was soon repeated. He became an open suitor for the hand of Elinor D'Avenant; and, after a wooing of several months, he married her.

The passionate love with which she had inspired him was only deepened by their life together. Always her allurement was that of things half understood, of momentous revelations eternally half withheld. She seemed to love him truly in return; but ever her heart and soul were strange to him, ever they were mysterious and exotic, even as the first sight of her face had been. For this, mayhap, he loved her all the more. They were happy together; and she bore him one child, a son whom they named Ralph.

Now, in that other life, the Sir Roderick who was reading in the old library came to these words:

> "No man knew how it happed; but anon there were dreade whispers and foule rumours regarding the Ladye Elinore; and people said that she was a witch. And in their time these rumours reached the eare of Sir Roderick."

A horror crept upon the happy dream—a horror scarce to be comprehended in this modern age. There were formless evil wings that came to brood above Hagdon Hall; and the very air was poisoned with malignant murmurs. Day by day, and night by night, the baronet was tortured with a vile, unholy suspicion of the woman he loved. He watched her with a fearful anxiety, with eyes that dreaded to discern a new and more ominous meaning in her strange beauty. Then, when he could bear it no longer, he taxed her with the infamous things he had heard, hoping she would deny them and by virtue of her denial restore fully his former trust and peace of mind.

To his utter consternation, the Lady Elinor laughed in his face, with a soft, siren-like mirth, and made open avowal that the charges were true.

"And I trow," she added, "that you love me too well to disown or

betray me; that for my sake, if need be, you will become a veritable wizard, even as I am a witch; and will share with me the infernal sports of the Sabbat."

Sir Roderick pleaded, he cajoled, he commanded, he threatened; but ever she answered him with voluptuous laughter and Circean smiles; and ever she told him of those delights and privileges which are procurable only through damnation, through the perilous aid of demons and succubi. Till, through his exceeding love for her, even as she had foretold, Sir Roderick suffered himself to become an initiate in the arts of sorcery; and sealed his own pact with the powers of evil, that he might in all things be made forever one with her that he loved so dearly.

It was an age of dark beliefs and of practises that were no less dark; and witchcraft and sorcery were rampant throughout the land, among all classes. But in the Lilith-like Elinor there was a spirit of soulless depravity beyond that of all others; and beneath the seduction of her love the hapless Sir Roderick fell to depths wherefrom no man could return, and made mortgage of his soul and brain and body to Satan. He learned the varying malefic usages to which a waxen image could be put; he memorized the formulas that summon frightful things from their abode in the nethermost night, or compel the dead to do the abominable will of necromancers. And he was taught the secrets whereof it is unlawful to tell or even hint; and came to know the maledictions and invultuations which are lethal to more than the mortal flesh. And Hagdon Hall became the scene of pandemonian revels, of rites that were both obscene and blasphemous; and the terror and turpitude of hellish things were effluent therefrom on all the countryside. And amid her coterie of the damned, amid the witches and sorcerers and incubi that fawned upon her, the Lady Elinor exulted openly; and Sir Roderick was her partner in each new enormity or baleful deed. And in this atmosphere of noisome things, of Satanic crime and sacrilege, the child Ralph was alone innocent, being too young to be harmed thereby as yet. But anon the scandal of it all was a horror in men's souls that could be endured no longer; and the justice of the law, which made a felony of witchcraft, was called upon by the people of Hagdon.

It was no new thing for members of the nobility to be tried on such a charge before the secular or ecclesiastical courts. Such cases, in which the accusations were often doubtful or prompted by mere malice, had

sometines been fought at length. But this time the guilt of the defendants was so universally maintained, and the reprobation aroused thereby so profound, that only the briefest and most perfunctory trial was accorded them. They were sentenced to be burnt at the stake; the sentence to be carried out on the following day.

It was a chill, dank morning in autumn when Sir Roderick and Lady Elinor were borne to the place of execution and were tied to their respective stakes, with piles of dry fagots at their feet. They were set facing each other, so that neither might lose any detail of their mutual agony. A crowd was gathered about them, thronging the entire common —a crowd whose awful silence was unbroken by any outcry or murmur. So deep was the terror wrought by this infamous couple, that no one dared to execrate or mock them even in the hour of their downfall. Sir Roderick's brain was benumbed by the obloquy and shame and horror of his situation, by a realization of the ultimate depths to which he had fallen, of the bitter doom that was now imminent. He looked at his wife, and thought of how she had drawn him down from evil to evil through his surpassing love for her; and then he thought of the frightful searing pains that would convulse her soft body; and thinking of these he forgot his own fate.

Then, in a dim, exiguous manner, he remembered that somewhere in another century there sat another Sir Roderick who was reading all this in an old manuscript. If he could only break the necromantic spell of the tale, and re-identify himself with that other Sir Roderick, he would be saved from the fiery doom that awaited him, but if he could not deny the spell, he would surely perish, even as a falling man who reaches bottom in a dream is said to perish.

He looked again, and met the gaze of the Lady Elinor. She smiled across her bonds and fagots, with all the old seduction that had been so fatal to him. In the re-attained duality of his consciousness, it seemed as if she were aware of his intention and had willed to deter him. The ache and anguish of a deadly lure was upon him, as he closed his eyes and tried very hard to picture the old library and the very sheet of parchment which his other self was now perusing. If he could do this, the whole diabolical illusion would vanish, the process of visualization and sympathetic identification which had been carried to an hallucinative degree, would return to that which is normally experienced by the reader of an absorbing tale.

There was a crackling at his feet, for some one had lit the fagots. Sir Roderick opened his eyes a little, and saw that the pile at Lady Elinor's feet had likewise been lit. Threads of smoke were rising from each pile, with tiny tongues of flame that grew longer momently. He did not lift his eyes to the level of Lady Elinor's face. Resolutely he closed them again, and sought to re-summon the written page.

He was aware of a browing warmth underneath his soles; and now, with an agonizing flash of pain, he felt the licking of the flames about his ankles. But somehow, by a desperate effort of his will, like one who awakens voluntarily from a clutching nightmare, he saw before him the written words he was trying to visualize:

> "And both were burned at the stake on Hagdonne Common for their crimes against God and man."

The words wavered, they receded and drew near on a page that was still dim and enormous. But the crackling at his feet had ceased; the air was no longer dank and chill, no longer charged with acrid smoke. There was a moment of madly whirling vertigo and confusion; and then Sir Roderick's two selves were re-united, and he found that he was sitting in the library chair at Hagdon, staring with open eyes at the last sentences of the manuscript in his hands.

He felt as if he had been through some infernal ordeal that had lasted many years; and he was still half obsessed by emotions of sorrow and regret and horror that could belong only to a dead progenitor. But the whole thing was manifestly a dream, albeit terrible and real to a degree that he had never before experienced. He must have fallen asleep over the old record. . . . But why, then, if it were only a dream, did his ankles still pain him so frightfully, as if they had been seared by fire?

He bent down and examined them: beneath the Twentieth Century hose in which they were attired, he found the upward-flaring marks of recent burns!

THE VENUS OF AZOMBEII

THE statuette was not more than twelve inches in height, and represented a female figure that somehow reminded me of the Medicean Venus, despite many differences of feature and proportion. It was wrought of a black wood, almost as heavy as marble; and the unknown artist had certainly made the most of his material to suggest the admixture of a negroid strain with a type of beauty well-nigh classic in its perfection of line. It stood on a pedestal formed in imitation of a half-moon, with the cloven side of the hemisphere constituting the base. On studying it more closely, I found that the resemblance to the Venus de Medici was largely in the pose and in the curves of the hips and shoulders; but the right hand was more elevated than hers in its position, and seemed to caress the polished abdomen; and the face was fuller, with a smile of enigmatic voluptuousness about the heavy lips, and a sensuous droop to the deep eyelids, which were like the petals of some exotic flower when they fold beneath a sultry velvet evening. The workmanship was quite amazing and would not have been unworthy of the more archaic and primitive periods of Roman art.

My friend Marsden had brought the figurine with him on his return from Africa; and it stood always on his library table. It had fascinated me and had stirred my curiosity from the first; but Marsden was singularly reticent concerning it; and beyond telling me that it was of negro workmanship and represented the goddess of a little-known tribe on the

upper Benuwe, in Adamawa, he had so far declined to gratify my inquisitiveness. But his very reserve, and something of significant import, even of emotional perturbation in his tone whenever we spoke of the statuette, had made me believe that a story hung thereon; and, knowing Marsden as I did, remembering his habitual reticence recurrently varied by outbursts of a well-nigh garrulous confidentiality, I felt sure that he would tell me the story in due time.

I had known Marsden ever since our school-days, for we had both been in the same year at Berkeley. He possessed few friends, and none, perhaps, who had been intimate with him as long as I. So no one was better fitted than I to perceive the inexplicable change that had come over him since his two years of traveling in Africa. This change was both physical and spiritual, and some of its features were of so subtle a character that one could hardly give them a name or seize upon them with any degree of clearness. Others, though, were all too plainly marked: the increase of Marsden's natural melancholia, turning now into fits of ferocious depression; and the woeful deterioration of his health, never too robust even in its prime, would have been noticeable to the merest acquaintance. I remembered him as being very tall and wiry, with a sallow complexion, black hair, and eyes of a clear azure blue; but since his return, he was far thinner than of old, and he stooped so much that he gave the impression of having actually lost in height; his features were shrunken and wrinkled, his skin had become corpse-like in its pallor, his hair was heavily sprinkled with gray, and his eyes had darkened in an unaccountable manner, as if they had somehow absorbed the mysteriously profound and sinister blue of tropic nights. In them, there burned a fire they had never before possessed—a macabre fire such as one would find in the eyes of a man consumed by some equatorial fever. Indeed, it often occurred to me that the readiest explanation of the change in Marsden was that he had been seized by some lethal sickness of the jungle, from which he had not yet fully recovered. But this he had always denied when I questioned him.

The more elusive alterations at which I have hinted were mainly mental, and I shall not try to define all of them. But one, in particular, was quite signal: Marsden had always been a man of undoubted courage and hardihood, with nerves that were unshakable in spite of his melancholic disposition; but now I perceived in him at times a queer furtiveness, an undefinable apprehensiveness quite at variance with his

former character. Even in the midst of some trivial or commonplace conversation, a look of manifest fear would suddenly pass over his face, he would scrutinize the shadows of the room with an apprehensive stare, and would stop half-way in a sentence, apparently forgetting what he had started to say. Then, in a few moments, he would recover himself and go on with the interrupted speech. He had developed some odd mannerisms, too: one of them was, that he could never enter or leave a room without looking behind him, with the air of a man who fears that he is being followed or that some imminent doom is dogging his every footstep. But all this, of course, could have been explained as nervousness attendant upon, or resulting from, the illness that I suspected. Marsden himself would never discuss the matter; so, after a few discreet suggestions that might have led him to unbosom himself, if he so wished, I had tacitly ignored the visible changes in his manner and personality. But I sensed a real and perhaps tragic mystery, and felt also that the black figurine on Marsden's table was in some way connected with it. He had told me much concerning his trip to Africa, which had been undertaken because of a life-long fascination which that continent had held for him; but I knew intuitively that much more was being kept back.

One morning, about six weeks after Marsden's return, I called to see him, following several days of absence during which I had been extremely busy. He was living alone, with one servant, in the large house on Russian Hill, San Francisco, which he had inherited together with a considerable fortune from his parents, who were long dead. He did not come to answer my knock, as was his wont; and if my hearing were not exceptionally keen, I do not think I should have heard the feeble voice in which he called out, telling me to enter. Pushing open the door, I went through the hall into the library, from which his voice had issued, and found him lying on a sofa, near the table on which stood the black statuette. It was obvious to me at a glance that he was very ill; his thinness and pallor had increased to a shocking degree in the few days since I had seen him last, and I was immediately impressed by the singular fact that he had even shrunken more in stature than could be explained by the crouch of his shoulders. Everything about him had shriveled, had actually withered as if a flame were consuming him, and the form on the couch was that of a smaller man than my friend. He had aged, also, and his hair had taken on a new hoariness, as if white ashes had fallen

upon it. His eyes were pitifully sunken, and they burned as embers burn in deep caverns. I could scarcely repress a cry of astonishment and consternation when I saw him.

"Well, Holly," he greeted me, "I guess my days are numbered. I knew the thing would get me in time—I knew it when I left the shores of the Benuwe with that image of the goddess Wanaôs for a keepsake. . . . There are dreadful things in Africa, Holly—malignant lust, and corruption, and poison, and sorcery—things that are deadlier than death itself—at least, deadlier than death in any form that we know. Don't ever go there—if you have any care for the safety of body and soul."

I tried to reassure him, without paying ostensible heed to the more cryptic references, the more oracular hints in his utterance.

"There is some low African fever in your system." I said. "You should see a doctor—should, in fact, have seen one weeks or months ago. There's no reason why you shouldn't get rid of the trouble, whatever it is, now that you are back in America. But of course you need expert medical attention: you can't afford to neglect anything so insidious and obscure."

Marsden smiled—if the ghastly contortion of his lips could be called a smile. "It's no use, old man. I know my malady better than any doctor could know it. Of course, it may be that I have a little fever—that wouldn't be surprizing; but the fever isn't one that has ever been classified in medical lore. And there's no cure for it in any pharmacopoeia."

With the last word, his countenance assumed a horrible grimace of pain, and seemed to shrivel before me like a sheet of paper that turns ashen with fire. He no longer appeared to notice my presence, and began to mutter brokenly, in tones of a peculiar huskiness, in a harsh, grating whisper, as if the very cords of his throat were involved in the same shrinking that affected his face. I caught most, if not all, of the words:

"She is dying, too—as I am—even though she is a living goddess. . . . Mybaloë, why did you drink the palm-wine? . . . You, too, will shrivel up, and suffer these gnawing, clawing tortures. . . . Your beautiful body . . . how perfect, how magnificent it was! . . . You will shrivel up in a few weeks, like a little old woman . . . you will suffer the torments of hell-fire. . . . Mybaloë! Mybaloë!"

His speech became an indistinct moaning, in which portions of words were now and then audible. He had all the aspect of a dying man: his

whole body seemed to contract, as if all the muscles, all the nerves, even the very bones, were dwindling in size, were tightening to a locked rigidity; and his lips were drawn in a horrible rictus, showing a thin white line of teeth.

I ran to Marsden's dining-room, where I knew that a decanter full of old Scotch usually stood on the sideboard, and filled a sherry-glass with liquor. Hastening back, I succeeded, though with extreme difficulty, in forcing some of the strong spirit between his teeth. The effect was almost immediate: he revived into full consciousness, his facial muscles relaxed, and he no longer wore the look of tetanic agony that had possessed his whole body.

"I'm sorry to have been such a bother," he said. "But the crisis is past for today. . . . Tomorrow, though . . . that'll be another matter." He shuddered, and his eyes were dark with the haunting of some incombatable horror.

I made him drink the remainder of the whisky, and going to the telephone, took the liberty of summoning a doctor whose abilities were personally known to both of us. My friend smiled a little, in grateful recognition of my solicitude, but shook his head.

"The end won't be so very far off now," he said. "I know the symptoms; it's a matter of a fortnight, or little more, when matters reach the point that they have reached today."

"But what is it?" I cried. The query was prompted by horror and solicitude, more than curiosity.

"You will learn soon enough," he replied, pointing to the library table with a forefinger of skeleton thinness. "Do you see that manuscript?"

Following his direction, I perceived on the table, close to the wooden statuette, a pile of written sheets, which, in my natural concern regarding Marsden's illness, I had not before noticed.

"You are my oldest friend," he went on, "and I have been aware for quite a while past that I owe you an explanation of certain things that have puzzled you. But the matters involved are so strange, and so peculiarly intimate, that I have been unable to bring myself to a frank confession face to face. So I have written for you a full narration of the final two months of my stay in Africa, concerning which I have spoken so little heretofore. You are to take it home with you when you leave; but I must beg you not to read the manuscript until after my death. I

am sure I can trust you to respect my wishes in this regard. When you read it, you will learn the cause of my illness, and the story of the black figurine which has tantalized your curiosity so much."

A few minutes later, there came a knock on the door, and I went to answer it. As I expected, it was Dr. Felton, who lived only a few blocks away, and who had left home immediately in reply to my summons. He was a brisk and confident type of person, with the air of habitual reassurance, of professional good cheer, that goes so far in building up a doctor's reputation for proficiency. But I could see beneath his manner an undertone of doubt, of real bafflement, as he examined Marsden.

"I'm not altogether sure what is wrong," he admitted, "but I think the trouble is mainly digestive and nervous. Doubtless the African climate, and the food, must have upset you quite radically. You will need a nurse, if there is any recurrence of the attack you have had today."

He wrote a prescription, and left shortly after. Since I had a pressing engagement, I was obliged to follow him in about half an hour, taking with me the manuscript that Marsden had indicated. But before going, I called a nurse by telephone, with Marsden's authority, and left her in charge, promising to return as soon as possible.

Of the fortnight that followed, with the frightful protracted agonies, the brief and illusory shifts for the better, the ghastly replapses that characterized my friend's condition, I can not bear to write a full account. I spent with him all the time I could spare, for my presence seemed to comfort him a little, except during the awful daily crises, when he was beyond all consciousness of his surroundings. Toward the last, there were lengthening intervals of delirium, when he muttered wildly, or screamed aloud in terror of things or persons visible only to himself. To be with him, to watch him, was an ordeal without parallel; and to me, the most dreadful thing about it all was the progressive shriveling, the perpetual diminution of Marsden's head and body, and the lessening of his very stature, which went on hour by hour and day by day with paroxysmal accompaniments of a suffering not to be borne by human flesh without lapsing into madness or oblivion. . . . But I cannot enter into details, or describe the final stages; and I hardly dare even hint the condition in which he died and in which his body went to the undertaker. I can only say that in their extreme, their more than infantile dwarfage and devolution of form, the remains bore no likeness to anything that it would be permissible to name; also, that the task of

the undertaker and the pall-bearers was phenomenally light. . . . When the end came, I gave thanks to God for the belated mercy of my friend's death. I was completely worn out, and it was not until after the funeral that I summoned enough energy and resolution for a perusal of Marsden's manuscript.

The account was clearly written, in a fine, feline script, though the handwriting bore evidence of stress and agitation toward the end. I transcribe the narrative hereunder, with no liberties of abridgment or amplification:

I, Julius Marsden, have experienced all my life the ineffable nostalgia of the far-off and the unknown. I have loved the very names of remote places, of antipodean seas and continents and isles. But I have never found in any other word even a tithe of the untellable charm that has lain inherent for me ever since childhood in the three syllables of the word *Africa.* They have conjured up for me, as by some necromantic spell, the very quintessence of all mystery, of all romance, and no woman's name could have been dearer to me, or more eloquent of delight and allure, than the name of this obscure continent. By a happy dispensation, which, alas! does not invariably attend the fulfilment of our dreams, my twenty-two months of sojourning in Morocco, Tunis, Egypt, Zanzibar, Senegal, Dahomey and Nigeria had in no way disappointed me, for the reality was astoundingly like my vision. In the hot and heavy azure of the skies, the great levels of desert sand or of rampant jungles, the long and mighty rivers winding through landscapes of unbelievable diversity, I found something that was deeply congenial to my spirit. It was a realm in which my rarest dreams could dwell and expand with a sense of freedom never achievable elsewhere.

At the end of the twenty-second month of my sojourn, I was traveling on the upper reaches of the river Benuwe, that great eastern tributary of the Niger. My immediate objective was Lake Tchad, with whose confluent rivers the Benuwe is connected by means of an upland swamp. I had left Yollah, with several boatmen of the Foulah tribe, a race of negroid Mohammedans, and we had now rounded the eastern slope of Mount Alantika, that enormous granite bulk that looms for nine thousand feet from the fertile plains of Adamawa.

It was a picturesque and beautiful country through which we were passing. There were occasional villages surrounded by fields of durra, of cotton yams, and great stretches of wild, luxuriant forest, of baobabs,

bananas, deleb-palms, pandanus and plaintains, beyond which arose the castellated tops of ridgy hills and fantastically carven cliffs.

Toward sunset, Alantika had become a bluish blur in the distance, above the green sea of the jungle. As we went onward in our two small barges, one of which was mainly laden with my personal effects, I perceived that my boatmen were conversing among themselves in low voices, and caught a frequent repetition of the word "Azombeii," always with a note of fear and warning.

I had already picked up a little of the Foulah language; and one of the boatmen, a tall, well-featured fellow, bronze rather than black, was master of a sort of broken German variegated with a few words of English. I questioned him as to the subject and import of the conversation, and learned that Azombeii was the name of the district we were now approaching, which, he declared, was peopled by a pagan tribe of unusual ferocity, who were still suspected of cannibalism and human sacrifice. They had never been properly subdued, either by the Mohammedan conquerors of the country or by the present German administration, and lived very much to themselves in their own primeval way, worshipping a goddess named Wanaôs—a goddess unfamiliar to the other pagan tribes of Adamawa, who were all fetishists. They were especially inimical toward the Mohammedan negroes, and it was perilous to intrude upon their territory, particularly during the annual religious festival now being celebrated. He and his fellows, he confessed, were loth to proceed much farther.

On all this, at the time, I made no express comment. To me, the story seemed none too credible, and savored of the ignorant prejudice of insular peoples, who are ever suspicious and fearful of those beyond their own borders. But I was a little disturbed, for I did not want the course of my journey to be suspended by any difficulty with my boatmen or the natives.

The sun had now gone down with a tropical abruptness, and in the brief twilight I saw that the forest on the river-banks had become more dense and exuberant than any through which we had before passed. There were ancient baobabs, enormous in the gloom; and the pendant leaves of mammoth plants fell down to the river like cataracts of emerald. Over all, a primordial silence reigned—a silence fraught with the burden of things unutterable by human speech—with the furtive pulse of an esoteric and exotic life, the secret breathing of unformulable pas-

sion, of unapprehended peril, the spirit of a vast and insuppressible fecundity.

We landed on a grassy margin, and proceeded to make our camp for the night. After a meal of yams and ground-nuts and tinned meat, to which I added a little palm-wine, I brought up the matter of continuing our journey on the morrow; but not until I had pledged myself to triple the boatmen's wages would they promise to take me through the Azombeii country. I was more than ever inclined to make light of their fears, and, in fact, had begun to suspect that the whole business was mere play-acting, with no other purpose than the extortion of an increase of pay. But this, of course, I could not prove; and the boatmen were full of an apparent reluctance, vowing by Allah and his prophet Mohammed that the danger they would incur was incomparably dire—that they, and even myself, might furnish soup-meat for the revels of Azombeii, or smoke on a pagan altar, before the setting of tommorrow's sun. They also told me some curious details concerning the customs and beliefs of the people of Azombeii. These people, they said, were ruled by a woman who was looked upon as the living representative of the goddess Wanaôs, and who shared the divine honors accorded to her. Wanaôs, as far as I could gather, appeared to be a goddess of love and procreation, resembling somewhat in her character both the Roman Venus and the Carthaginian Tanit. I was struck even then by a certain etymological similarity of her name to that of Venus—a similarity regarding which I was soon to learn more. She was worshipped, they told me, with rites and ceremonies of an orgiastic license beyond all parallel—a license which shocked even the neighboring pagans, who were themselves given to vile practises not to be tolerated by any virtuous Moslem. They went on to say that the Azombeiians were also addicted to sorcery, and that their witch-doctors were feared throughout Adamawa.

My curiosity was aroused, though I told myself that in all probability the rumors related by the boatmen were fables or gross exaggerations. But I had seen something of negro religious rites, and was able to credit the tales of orgiastic excess, at any rate. Pondering the strange stories I had heard, my imagination became excited, and I did not fall asleep till after an unwonted interval.

My slumber was heavy, and full of troubled dreams that appeared to prolong intolerably the duration of the night. I awoke a little before dawn, when the red horn of a waning moon had begun to set behind

the serrate edges of palm-trees in the west. Looking about in the half-light, with eyes that were still bemused with sleep, I found myself entirely alone: The boatmen and their barges were gone, though all of my personal property and some of the provisions had been left behind with an honesty quite scrupulous, considering the circumstances. Evidently the fears expressed by the Foulahs had been genuine, and discretion had overpowered their desire for gain.

Somewhat dismayed by the prospect of having to continue my journey alone—if it were to be continued at all—and without means of navigation or conveyance, I stood irresolute on the river-bank, as the dawn began to brighten. I did not like the idea of turning back; and, since I did not consider it at all probable that I could be in any bodily danger at the hands of the natives, in a region under German rule, I finally resolved to go on and try to engage bearers or boatmen in the Azombeii district. It would be necessary for me to leave most of my effects by the river for the present, and return for them later, trusting to find them undisturbed.

I had no sooner made up my mind to this course of procedure, than I heard a soft rustling in the long grasses behind me. Turning, I perceived that I was no longer alone, though my companions were not the missing Foulahs, as I had hoped for a brief instant. Two negro women, attired in little more than the lightening amber air of morn, stood close beside me. Both were fairly tall, and well-proportioned, but it was the foremost of the two who caught my attention with a veritable shock of surprize not altogether due to the suddenness of her approach.

Her appearance would have surprized me anywhere, at any time. Her skin was a lustrous velvet black, with subtle gleams of rapid-running bronze; but all her features and proportions, by some astounding anomaly, were those of an antique Venus. Indeed, I have seldom seen in Causcasian women a more consummate regularity of profile and facial contour. As she stood before me without moving, she might have been a woman of Rome or Pompeii, sculptured in black marble by a staturary of the Latin decadence. She wore a look that was both demure and sensual, an expression full of cryptic poise allied with great sweetness. Her hair was done in a rich coil on the nape of a comely neck. Between her breasts, on a chain of beaten silver, hung several ruddy garnets, carven with rough intaglios whos precise nature I did not notice at the time. Her eyes met mine with perfect frankness, and she smiled with an air

of naive delight and mischief at my all-too-obvious dumfoundment. That smile made me her voluntary captive henceforward.

The second woman was of a more negroid type, though personable enough in her way. By her bearing and demeanor, she gave the impression of being somehow subordinate to the first, and I assumed that she was a slave or servant. The one semblance of a garment worn by both was a little square of cloth depending in front from a girdle of palm-fiber; but the fabric of the square worn by the first was finer than that of the other, and differed from it in having a fringe of silky tassels.

The leader turned and spoke a few words to her companion in mellifluous liquid tones, and the servant replied in a voice almost equally soft and musical. The word "*Aroumani*" was repeated several times, with accompanying glances at me, and I readily surmised that I was the theme of their conversation. I could not understand their speech, which bore no likeness to the Foulah language, and, indeed, was different from that of any pagan tribe I had so far encountered in Adamawa. But some of the vocables teased me with a vague sense of familiarity, though I could not define or aline this familiarity at the moment.

I addressed the two women in the scant Foulah that I knew, asking if they were of the Azombeii tribe. They smiled, and nodded their heads in recognition of the word, and made signs to me that I was to follow them.

The sun had now leapt above the horizon, and the forest was filled with a great and golden radiance as the women led me away from the river-shore and along a meandering path among gigantic baobabs. They walked before me with a grave and effortless grace, and the leader looked back every now and then over her shapely shoulder, smiling with a complaisant curve of the full lips and a delicious droop of the carven lids that had in them a trace of simple coquetry. I followed, half overcome by emotions that were new to me—by the first pulsations of a mounting fever of the senses and the mind, the stirring of unfamiliar curiosities, the subtle languor, the poppy-drowsy delight of a Circean enchantment. I felt as if the immemorial attraction of Africa had suddenly become embodied for me in a human shape.

The forest began to thin, and we came to cultivated fields, and then to a large village of clay huts. My sable guides pointed to the village, saying the one word: "Azombeii," which, as I learned later, was the name of the principal town as well as of the district in general.

The place was astir with negroes, many of whom, both male and female, were possessed of a clear-cut type of feature unaccountably reminiscent of the classical, and similar to that of the two women. Their skins varied from darkest ebony to a sultry, tarnished copper. Many of them crowded around us immediately, regarding me with a sort of friendly inquisitiveness, and making signs of obeisance and reverence before my Venus-like companion. It was clear that she occupied a place of high importance among them, and I wondered, not for the first time, if she were the woman of whom the Foulahs had spoken—the ruler of the Azombeii and the living viceregent of the goddess Wanaôs.

I tried to converse with the natives, but could not make myself understood until an old man with a bald head and a straggling fringe of gray beard came forward and hailed me in broken English. He, it seemed, had traveled as far afield as Nigeria during his youth, which accounted for his linguisitic accomplishments. None of the others had ever been more than a few miles beyond the confines of his own territory; and apparently the tribe had little intercourse with outsiders, either negro or Caucasian.

The old man was most affable and loquacious, evidently delighting in an opportunity to air his command of a foreign tongue. It was hardly necessary to question him, for he began at once to volunteer the information which I desired. His people, he announced, were very glad to see me, for they were friendly toward the whites, though they had no manner of use for the Moslem negroes of Adamawa. Also, he went on, it was manifest that I had won the favor and protection of the goddess Wanaôs, since I appeared among them under the guidance of Mybaloë, their beloved ruler, in whom the spirit of the goddess resided. At this, he made an humble obeisance toward my lovely guide, who smiled, and addressed a few sentences to him, which he forthwith interpreted, saying that Mybaloë had proffered me an invitation to remain in Azombeii as her guest.

I had intended to broach immediately the matter of hiring bearers, or engaging boatmen for the continuance of my journey on the Benuwe; but at this invitation, and the sweet, wistful, almost supplicating look which Mybaloë directed upon me as her words were being translated, I forgot all about my plans, and told the interpreter to thank Mybaloë and say that I accepted the invitation. A few hours earlier, I should not have dreamt of the possibility of feeling any specific interest in a black

woman, since that aspect of the charm of Africa was one which had never really touched me heretofore. But now, the first weavings of an unforeseen magic were upon me: my senses had become preternaturally active, and my normal processes of thought were benumbed as by the working of some insidious opiate. I had been eager to reach Lake Tchad, and the idea of tarrying by the way had never before occurred to me: now, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to remain in Azombeii, and Lake Tchad became a dimly receding mirage, far off on the borders of oblivion.

Mybaloë's face grew radiant as a summer morn, when my acceptance was interpreted. She spoke to some of the people about her, obviously giving them instructions. Then she disappeared into the crowd, and the old interpreter, with several others, led me to a hut which they put at my disposal. The hut was quite clean, and the floors were strewn with strips of palm-leaf, which exhaled an agreeable odor. Food and wine were set before me and the old man and two girls remained in attendance, saying that they had been appointed as my servants. I had barely finished my meal, when some more natives entered, bearing the belongings I had left by the river-side.

Now, in reply to my queries, the interpreter, whose name was Nygaza, told me as much as his rudimentary English would convey regarding the history, habits and religion of the people of Azombeii. According to their traditions, the worship of Wanaôs among them was almost as old as the world itself, and had been introduced ages and ages ago by some white strangers from the north, who called themselves *Aroumani*. These strangers had settled and married among the natives, and their blood had gradually become disseminated throughout the whole tribe, who had always remained apart from the other pagans of Adamawa. All white people were called *Aroumani* by them, and were looked upon with peculiar respect, on account of these traditions. Wanaôs, as the Foulahs had said, was a deity of love and fecundation, the mother of all life, the mistress of the world, and her image had been accurately graven in wood by the pale strangers, so that the Azombeiians might have an exemplar for their idols. It had always been customary to associate a living woman with her worship, as a sort of avatar or embodiment of the goddess, and the most beautiful maiden of the district was chosen by the priests and priestesses for this rôle, and filled also the office of queen, with the privilege of taking to herself a

male consort. Mybaloë, a girl of eighteen, had recently been elected; and the annual festival of Wanaôs, which consisted of liberal drinking and feasting, together with nightly ceremonies of worship, was now in progress.

While I listened to the old man, I indulged in certain speculations of a surprizing order. I deemed it not impossible that the pale strangers of whom he spoke had been a party of Roman explorers, who had crossed the Sahara from Carthage and penetrated the Sudan. This would account for the classic features of Mybaloë and others of the Azombeiians, and for the name and character of the local goddess. Also, the vague familiarity of some of the words spoken by Mybaloë was now explicable, since I realized that these words had borne a partial resemblance to Latin vocables. Much amazed by what I had learned and by all that I had succeeded in piecing together, I lost myself in odd reveries, while Nygaza continued his babbling.

The day wore on, and I did not see Mybaloë, as I had fully expected, nor did I receive word from her. I began to wonder a little. Nygaza said that her absence was attributable only to urgent duties; he leered discreetly, as he assured me that I would soon see her again.

I went for a walk through the village, accompanied by the interpreter and the girls, who refused to leave me for a moment. The town, as I have said, was large for an African village, and must have comprised two or three thousand people. All was neat and orderly, and the general degree of cleanliness was quite remarkable. The Azombeiians, I could see, were thrifty and industrious, and gave evidence of many civilized qualities.

Toward the hour of sunset, a messenger came, bearing an invitation from Mybaloë, which Nygaza translated. I was to dine with her in her palace, and then attend the evening rites in the local temple.

The palace stood on the very outskirts of the town, among palms and pandanus, and was merely an overgrown hut, as African palaces are wont to be. But the interior proved to be quite comfortable, even luxurious, and a certain barbaric taste had been displayed in its furnishing. There were low couches along the walls, covered with draperies of native weaving, or the skins of the *ayu,* a sort of fresh-water seal found in a Benuwe. In the center was a long table, not more than a foot in height from the floor, around which the guests were squatted. In one corner, as in a niche, I noticed a small wooden image of a female figure,

which I rightly took to be a representation of Wanaôs. The figure bore a strange resemblance to the Roman Venus; but I need not describe it further, since you have often seen it on my library table.

Mybaloë greeted me with many compliments, which were duly translated by Nygaza; and I, not to be outdone, replied with speeches of a flowery fervor by no means insincere. My hostess had me seated at her right hand, and the feast began. The guests, I learned, were mostly priests and priestesses of Wanaôs. All of them regarded me with friendly smiles, with the exception of one man, who wore a murderous frown. This man, Nygaza told me in a whisper almost inaudible, was the high-priest Mergawe, a mighty sorcerer or witch-doctor, much feared rather than revered, who had long been in love with Mybaloë and had hoped to be chosen for her consort.

As unobtrusively as I could, I surveyed Mergawe with more attention. He was a muscular brute, over six feet in height, and broad without being stout. His face was regular in outline, and would have been handsome, were it not for the distortion due to a most malignant expression. Whenever Mybaloë smiled upon me or addressed some remark to me through Nygaza, his look became a demoniacal glare. I readily perceived that the first day of my visit in Azombeii had brought me a powerful enemy, as well as a possible sweetheart.

The table was laden with equatorial delicacies, with the meat of young rhinoceros, several kinds of wild fowl, bananas, papayas, and a sweet, highly intoxicating palm-wine. Most of the guests were prone to gorge themselves in true African fashion, but Mybaloë's manner of eating was as dainty as that of any European girl, and she endeared herself to me all the more by her restraint. Mergawe also ate little, but drank immoderately, in a seeming attempt to achieve inebriation as soon as possible. The eating and drinking went on for hours, but I paid less and less attention to it and to my fellow-guests, in the ever-growing enchantment of Mybaloë's presence. Her sinuous youthful grace of figure, her lovely tender eyes and lips, were far more potent than the wine, and I soon forgot to notice even the baleful glaring of Mergawe. On her part, Mybaloë displayed toward me a frank favor, swiftly conceived and avowed, which she did not even dream of disguising. She and I began to speak a language which did not require the interpretation of old Nygaza. With the one exception of Mergawe, no one seemed to regard our mutual infatuation with anything but approval.

Presently the time of the evening rites approached, and Mybaloë excused herself, telling me that she would meet me later in the temple. The gathering broke up, and Nygaza led me through the nocturnal village, where groups of people were feasting and revelling about their fires in the open air. We entered the jungle, which was full of voices and flitting shadowy forms, all on their way to the fane of Wanaôs. I had no idea what the temple would be like, though somehow I did not expect the usual African fetish-house. To my surprize, it proved to be an enormous cave in a hill back of the village. It was illumined by many torches, and had already become crowded with the worshippers. At the farther end of the huge chamber, whose lofty vault was dark with impenetrable shadow, there stood on a sort of natural dais an image of Wanaôs, carved in the customary black wood of a tree that is native to Azombeii. The image was somewhat more than life-size. Beside it, on a wooden seat that could easily have accommodated another person, sat Mybaloë, statuesque and immobile as the goddess herself. Fragrant leaves and grasses were burning on a low altar, and tom-toms were throbbing with delirious insistence, regular as the beating of turgid pulses, in the gloom behind the goddess and her mortal viceregent. The priests, priestesses and devotees were all naked, except for little squares of cloth similar to that worn by Mybaloë, and their bodies gleamed like polished metal in the wildly flickering light of the torches. All were chanting a solemn monotonous litany, and they swayed in the slow movements of a hieratic dance, lifting their arms toward Wanaôs, as if to invoke her favor.

There was an undeniable impressiveness about it all; and as if by contagion, a bizarre excitement began to invade me, and something of the sacred fervor felt by the devotees found its way into my own blood. With eyes intent upon Mybaloë, who seemed to be in a veritable trance, unconscious or unheedful of all about her, I felt the resurgence of atavistic impulses, of barbaric passions and superstitions, latent in the subterranean depths of being. I knew the promptings of a savage hysteria, of a lust both animal and religious.

The old interpreter, who had disappeared in the throng, returned to my side anon, saying that Mybaloë had requested that I come forward to her seat. How the request had been communicated I can not imagine, for surely her lips had never opened or moved beneath my intent and passionate watching. The worshippers made way for me, and I stood

before her, thrilling almost with a kind of awe, as well as a frenetic desire, when I met her eyes that were filled by the solemn posession of the amorous deity. She motioned me to seat myself beside her. By this act, as I learned later, she selected me before all the world as her consort, and I, by accepting the invitation, became her official lover.

Now, as if my enthronement with Mybaloë were a signal, the ceremonies took on a new excitation, with an orgiastic trend at which I can only hint. Things were done at which Tiberias would have blushed: Elephantis itself could have learned more than one secret from these savages. The cavern became a scene of indiscriminate revel, and the goddess and her representative were alike forgotten in the practise of rites that were doubtless appropriate enough, considering the nature of Wanaôs, even though they were highly improper from a civilized viewpoint. Through it all, Mybaloë maintained a perfect immobility, with open eyes whose lids were still as those of the statue. At last she arose and looked around the cavern upon her oblivious devotees with a gaze that was wholly inscrutable. Then she turned to me, with a demure smile and a slight movement of the hand, and beckoned me to follow her. Unnoticed by any one, we left the orgies and came forth upon the open jungle, where warm gusts of perfume wandered beneath the tropical stars. . . .

From that night there began for me a new life—a life which I will not try to defend, but will only describe, as far as any description is possible. I had never before conceived of anything of the sort; I should never have believed myself capable of the sensuous fervor I felt for Mybaloë, and the almost inenarrable experiences into which her love initiated me. The dark electric vitality of the very earth upon which I trod, the humid warmth of the atmosphere, the life of the swiftly growing luxuriant plants, all became an intimate part of my own entity, were mingled with the ebb and flow of my blood, and I drew nearer than ever before to the secret of the charm that had lured me across the world to that esoteric continent. A powerful fever exalted all my senses, a deep indolence bedrugged my brain. I lived, as never before, and never again, to the full capacity of my corporeal being. I knew, as an aborigine knows, the mystic impact of perfume and color and savor and tactual sensation. Through the flesh of Mybaloë, I touched the primal reality of the physical world. I had no longer any thoughts, or even dreams, in the abstract meaning of such terms, but existed wholly in

relation to my surroundings, to the diurnal flux of light and darkness, of sleep and passion, and all sensory impressions.

Mybaloë, I am sure, was indeed lovable, and her charm, though highly voluptuous, was not altogether of the body. She had a fresh and naive nature, laughter-loving and kindly, with less of actual or latent cruelty than is common to the African. And always I found in her, even apart from her form and features, a delightful suggestion of the elder pagan world, a hint of the classic woman and the goddess of old myths. Her sorcery, perhaps, was not really complex; but its power was complete, and lay as far beyond analysis as beyond denial. I became the ecstatic slave of a loving and indulgent queen.

The flowers of an equatorial spring were now in bloom, and our nights were opiate or aphrodisiac with their fragrance. The noctural heavens were full of fervid stars, the moons were balmy and propitious, and the people of Azombeii looked with favor upon our love, since the will of Mybaloë was to them the will of the goddess.

One cloud alone—a cloud which we scarcely regarded at first—was visible in our firmament. This cloud was the jealousy and ill-will of Mergawe, the high-priest of Wanaôs. He glowered with a lethal malignity, sullen as a negro Satan, whenever I happened to meet him; but his ill-will was not otherwise demonstrated, either by word or act; and Nygaza and Mybaloë both assured me that overt hostility on his part would be most improbable at any time, since, because of Mybaloë's divine office and my position as her lover, anything of the sort would savor of actual blasphemy.

As for me, I felt an intuitive distrust of the sorcerer, though I was far too happy to expend much thought on the problem of his potential maleficence. However, the man was an interesting type, and his reputation was literally something with which to conjure. People believed that he knew the language of animals, and could even hold converse with trees and stones, which accorded him whatever information he might require. He was reputed to be a master of what is known as "bad fetish"—that is to say, he could lay an evil spell on the person or possessions of whosoever had incurred his enmity. He was a practitioner of invultuation, and was also said to know the secret of a terrible slow poison, which caused its victims to wither up and shirvel to the stature of a new-born child, with prolonged and hellish agonies—a poison which did not begin to operate for weeks or even months after the time of its consumption.

The days went by, and I lost all proper count of their passage, reckoning time only by the hours I spent with Mybaloë. The world and its fullness were ours—ours were the deep-blue heavens and the flowering forest and the grassy meadows by the riverside. As lovers are prone to do, we found for ourselves more than one favorite haunt, to which we liked to repair at recurrent intervals. One of these haunts was a grotto behind the cave-temple of Wanaôs, in whose center was a great pool fed by the river Benuwe through subterranean channels. At some remote time, the roof of the grotto had broken in, leaving a palm-fringed aperture in the hill-top, through which the sunlight or moonlight fell with precipitate rays upon the somber waters. Around the sides there were many broad ledges and fantastic alcoves of columnar stone. It was a place of weird beauty, and Mybaloë and I had spent more than one moon-lit hour on the couch-like shelves above the pooe. The waters were inhabited by several crocodiles, but of these we took little heed, absorbed in each other and in the bizarre loveliness of the grotto, that always changed with the changing light.

One day, Mybaloë had been summoned away from the village on some errand whose nature I can not now remember. Doubtless it concerned some problem of justice or native politics. At any rate, she was not expected back till the following noon. Therefore, I was quite surprized when a messenger came to me at evening, with word that Mybaloë would return sooner than she had planned, and that she requested me to meet her in the grotto behind the cave of Wanaôs at the hour when the rays of the moon, now slightly gibbous, would first fall through the opening above. The native who brought the message was a man I had never seen before, but of this I thought nothing, since he purported to come from the outlying village to which Mybaloë had been called.

I reached the cavern at the hour appointed, and paused on the verge of one of the ledges, looking about in the uncertain light for Mybaloë. The moon had begun to pour a faery radiance over the rough edge of the pit in the cavern-dome. I saw a stealthy movement in the waters beneath me, where a crocodile slid through the silver-gleaming ebony of the surface; but of Mybaloë herself I could find no visible sign anywhere. I wondered if she were not hiding from me in some prankish mood, and resolved to make a search of the alcoves and shelves on tiptoe, in order to surprize her.

I was about to leave the ledge on which I stood, when I received a violent push from behind, which precipitated me with a headlong suddenness into the black pool seven or eight feet below. The waters were deep, and I sank almost to the bottom before I recovered myself or even realized what had happened. Then I rose and struck out blindly for the shore, remembering with a thrill of terror the crocodile I had seen a moment before my fall. I reached the edge, where it shelved down with accessible gradations, but the water was still deep, and my fingers slipped on the smooth stone. Behind me, I heard a furtive rippling, and knew its causation all to well. Turning my head, I saw two of the great saurians, whose eyes burned with unholy phosphorescence in the moonlight as they glided toward me.

I think that I must have cried aloud; for, as if in answer, I heard a woman's voice cry out on the ledge above, and then the rippled waters were cleft by a falling form that shone for an instant with a flash as of black marble. A breathless interval, while the waters foamed, and then a well-known head arose beside me, and an arm that held aloft a glittering knife. It was Mybaloë herself. With miraculous adroitness, she drove the knife to its hilt in the side of the foremost crocodile, as the monster opened his formidable jaws to seize me. Her stroke had found the heart, and the crocodile slipped back beneath the surface, thrashing about in a brief agony. But its companion came on without pausing, and met the same unerring thrust of Mybaloë's knife. There were stirrings in the pool, and the dark bodies of others began to appear. With a superhuman agility, in what was seemingly no more than a single movement, Mybaloë drew herself out on the rocks of the margent, and caught my hands in hers. An instant more, and I stood beside her, hardly knowing how I had come there, so light and swift had been my ascent. The crocodiles were nosing the shore beneath us when I turned to look back.

Breathless and dripping, we sat on a moon-bright shelf of the cavern and began to question each other, with tender interludes of silence and caresses. In a few weeks, I had learned much of the Azombeiian tongue, and we no longer required an interpreter at any time.

To my astonishment, Mybaloë denied having sent me a messenger that evening. She had returned because of an overwhelming premonition of some imminent evil that menaced me, and had felt herself

drawn irresistibly to the grotto, arriving just in time to find me floundering in the pool. While passing through the cave of Wanaôs, from which a low tunnel led to the open grotto, she had met a man in the darkness, and thought that it might have been Mergawe. He had passed without speaking, in as much haste as Mybaloë herself. I told her of the push I had received from behind as I stood on the ledge. It was all too evident that I had been lured to the cavern by some one who desired to make away with me; and, as far as we knew, Mergawe was the one person in Azombeii capable of conceiving or nurturing such a motive. Mybaloë became very grave, and little more was said between us regarding the matter.

After our return to the village, Mybaloë sent several men to search for Mergawe and bring him before her. But the sorcerer had disappeared, and no one could tell his whereabouts, though more than one person had seen him earlier in the evening. He did not return to his dwelling on the morrow; and though a sedulous and thorough quest was instituted throughout the whole of Azombeii, no trace of him could be found during the days following. His very disappearance, of course, was taken for an implicit confession of guilt. Supreme indignation was rife among the people when the episode in the grotto became publicly known; and in spite of the fear his reputation had evoked, Mergawe would have fared disastrously at their hands, and the sentence of death pronounced against him by Mybaloë would have been needless, if he had dared to show himself among his fellow-tribesmen.

The unexpected peril I had faced, and the marvelous rescue effected by Mybaloë, served to draw us even closer together, and our passion found a new depth and gravity henceforward. But as time went on, and nothing was heard of Mergawe, who seemed to have been swallowed up by the wide and sultry silence of the equatorial spaces, the episode began to recede, and gradually dwindled to our view in a lengthening perspective of blissful days. We ceased to apprehend any further attempt at harm on the part of the witch-doctor, and were lulled to an indolent security, in which our happiness took on the hues of its maturing summer.

One night, the priests of Wanaôs were giving a dinner in my honor. Forty or fifty people were already gathered in a banqueting-hall not far from the temple, but Mybaloë had not yet arrived. As we sat awaiting her, a man entered, bearing a large calabash full of palm-

wine. The man was a stranger to me, though he was evidently known to some of the people present, who hailed him by name, calling him Marvasi.

Addressing me, Marvasi explained that he had been sent by the people of an outland community with a gift of palm-wine, which they hoped that I, as the consort of Mybaloë, would deign to accept. I thanked him, and bade him convey my acknowledgment to the donors of the wine.

"Will you not taste the wine now?" he said. "I must return immediately; but before leaving, I should like to learn if the gift meets with your approval, so that I can tell my people."

I poured out some of the wine into a cup and drank it very slowly, as one does in testing the savor and quality of a beverage. It was quite sweet and heavy, with a peculiar after-flavor of puckerish bitterness which I did not find altogether agreeable. However, I praised the wine, not wishing to hurt Marvasi's feelings. He grinned with apparent pleasure at my words, and was about to depart, when Mybaloë entered. She was panting with haste, her expression was both wild and stern, and her eyes blazed with unnatural fire. Rushing up to me, she snatched the empty wine-cup from my fingers.

"You have drunk it?" she cried, in a tone of statement more than of query.

"Yes," I replied, in great wonder and perplexity.

The look that she turned upon me was indescribable, and full of conflicting elements. Horror, agony, devotion, love and fury were mingled in it, but I knew somehow that the fury was not directed toward me. For one intense moment her eyes held mine; then, averting her face, she pointed to Marvasi and bade the priests of Wanaôs to seize and bind him. The command was instantly obeyed. But before offering any explanation, and without saying a word to me or to anyone, Mybaloë poured out a cupful of the palm-wine and drank it at a single draft. Beginning to suspect the truth, I would have seized it from her hand, but she was too quick for me.

"Now we will both die," she said, when she had emptied the cup. For a moment, her face assumed a tranquil smile, then it became the countenance of an avenging goddess as she turned her attention to the wretched Marvasi. Every one present had now surmised the truth, and mutterings of rage and horror were heard on all sides. Marvasi would

have been torn limb from limb, joint from joint, muscle from muscle, by the bare hands of the priests if it had not been for Mybaloë, who intervened and told them to wait. Stricken with abject terror, the man cowered among his captors, knowing too well the manner of doom that would be meted out to him in spite of any momentary reprieve.

Mybaloë began to interrogate him in brief, stern sentences, and Marvasi, whose awe of her was even more patent than his fear of the priests, made answer with many stammerings as he cringed and fawned. He confessed that the wine was poisoned; also, that he had been hired by the sorcerer and high-priest Mergawe to proffer it to me and see that I drank some of it at once, if possible. Mergawe, he said, had been hiding in the forest on the borders of Azombeii for weeks, living in a secret cavern known only to himself and a few adherents, who had brought him food and such news as he desired to learn. Marvasi, who was under certain intimate obligations to Mergawe, and had been used by him as a tool on other occasions, was one of these adherents.

"Where is Mergawe now?" questioned Mybaloë. Marvasi would have hesitated, but the eyes of the queen, ablaze with anger and with superhuman mesmerism, dragged the very truth from his reluctant lips. He said that Mergawe was now lurking in the jungle, on the outskirts of the town of Azombeii, waiting for assurance that the poison had been drunk by its intended victim.

A number of the priests were at once dispatched to find Mergawe. While they were absent, Mybaloë told me how warning of the plan to poison me had been brought to her by another of Mergawe's friends, who had recoiled at the final hour from the atrociousness and audacity of such a design.

The priests returned in a little while, bringing the captive sorcerer. They had succeeded in coming upon him unaware, and though he struggled with demoniacal strength and fury, they bore him down and bound him with thongs of rhinoceros hide. They brought him into the banqueting-hall amid a horror-frozen silence.

In spite of his desperate predicament, the face of the sorcerer was full of a malevolent triumph, as he stood before us. Proud, and superbly erect, he gave no evidence of fear, but his mien proclaimed the Satanic possession of an evil exultation. Before Mybaloë could question or address him, he began to pour forth a torrent of dreadful mouthings, intermingled with maledictions and vituperations. He told us how he had

prepared the poison, he enumerated the fearsome ingredients, the slowly chanted and lethiferous runes, the manifold and mighty power of the baleful fetishes that had gone into or had helped in its making. Then he described the action of the poison, the preliminary months during which Mybaloë and I would suffer innumerable pangs, would die uncounted deaths in our anticipation of the deferred agonies to come; and then the interminable tortures themselves, the slow and hideous contraction of all our fibers, all our organs, the drying-up of the very sources of life, and the shrinkage to infantile, or even pre-infantile, stature and dimensions before the relief of death. Forgetful of all but his mad hatred, his insensate jealously, he lingered over these details, he repeated them again and again with so vile a gloating, so horrible and rapturous a relish, that a sort of paralyzing spell was laid upon the assembly, and no one stepped forward to silence him with a knife or a spear.

At last, while his mouthings continued, Mybaloë filled another cup with the poisoned wine; and while the priests held Margawe and forced his teeth apart with their spear-blades, she poured the wine down his throat. Oblivious or contemptuous of his doom, he betrayed no slightest quiver or shrinking of fear, but glared with that awful look of exultation all the while, like a black fiend who rejoices over the damned, even though he himself is numbered among them. Marvasi was also compelled to drink the wine, and he cringed and cried with terror, frothing at the mouth when the lethal liquor touched his tongue. Then the two men, by Mybaloë's order, were led away and imprisoned, and were left under a strong guard to await the working of the poison. But later in the night, when their deed became known to the populace, a multitude of men and women, maddened beyond all measure or control, broke in and overpowered the guards and carried Marvasi and Mergawe to the grotto behind the cave of Wanaôs, where they were flung like offal to the crocodiles in the black pool.

Now, for Mybaloë and me, there began a life of indepictable horror. Dead was all our former joy and happiness, for the blackness of the doom to come lay on us like the charnel shadow cast by the gathering of myriad vultures. Love, it is true, was still ours, but love that already seemed to have entered the hideous gloom and nothingness of

the grave. . . . But of these things I can not tell you, though I have told you so much. . . . They were too sacred and too terrible. . . .

After the leaden lapse of funereal days, beneath heavens from which for us the very azure had now departed, it was agreed between Mybaloë and me that I should leave Azombeii and return to my native land. Neither of us could bear the thought of having to witness day by day the eventual torments and progressive physical disintegration of the other when Mergawe's poison began to operate. Of our farewell meeting, I can say only that it was infinitely sorrowful, and that I shall remember the love and grief in Mybaloë's eyes amid the culminative pangs and disordered illusions of my last delirium. Before I left, she gave me for a keepsake the little image of Wanaôs, concerning which you have asked me so often.

It is needless to detail my return to America. Now, after months of a delay that has had in it nothing of mercy or mitigation, I feel the first workings of the poison; I have recognized all its preliminary symptoms, and the sickening expectations of haunted days and sleep-forbidden nights are being realized. And knowing all that is yet to come, and seeing with a clarity of imaginative vision that sears my soul the coincidental agonies of Mybaloë, I have begun to envy the death of Marvasi and Mergawe in the pool of crocodiles.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE RATTLESNAKE

"No, as I've told you fellows before, I haven't a red cent's worth of faith in the supernatural."

The speaker was Arthur Avilton, whose tales of the ghostly and macabre had often been compared to Poe, Bierce and Machen. He was a master of imaginative horrors, with a command of diabolically convincing details, of monstrous cobweb suggestions that had often laid a singular spell on the minds of readers who were not ordinarily attracted or impressed by literature of that type. It was his own boast, often made, that all his effects were secured in a purely ratiocinative, even scientific manner, by playing on the element of subconscious dread, the ancestral superstition latent in most human beings; but he claimed that he himself was utterly incredulous of anything occult or fantasmal, and that he had never in his life known the slightest tremor of fear concerning such things.

Avilton's listeners looked at him a little questioningly. They were John Godfrey, a young landscape painter, and Emil Schuler, a rich dilettante, who played in alternation with literature and music, but was not serious in his attentions to either. Both were old friends and admirers of Avilton, at whose house on Sutter Street, in San Francisco, they had met by chance that afternoon. Avilton had suspended work on a new story to chat with them and smoke a sociable pipe. He still sat at

his writing-table, with a pile of neatly written foolscap before him. His appearance was as normal and noneccentric as his handwiriting, and he might have been a lawyer or doctor or chemist, rather than a concocter of bizarre fiction. The room, his library, was quite luxurious, in a sober, gentlemanly sort of fashion, and there was little of the outré in its furnishings. The only unusual notes were struck by two heavy brass candlesticks on his table wrought in the form of rearing serpents, and a stuffed rattlesnake that was coiled on top of one of the low bookcases.

"Well," observed Godfrey, "if anything could convince me of the reality of the supernatural, it would be some of your stories, Avilton. I always read them by broad daylight—I wouldn't do it after dark on a bet. . . . By the way, what's the yarn you are working on now?"

"It's about a stuffed serpent that suddenly comes to life," replied Avilton. "I'm calling it *The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake.* I got the idea while I was looking at my rattler this morning."

"And I suppose you'll sit here by candlelight tonight," put in Schuler, "and go on with your cheerful little horror without turning a hair." It was well known that Avilton did much of his writing at night.

Avilton smiled. "Darkness always helps me to concentrate. And, considering that so much of the action in my tales is nocturnal, the time is not inappropriate."

"You're welcome," said Schuler, in a jocular tone. He arose to go, and Godfrey also found that it was time to depart.

"Oh, by the way," said their host, "I'm planning a little week-end party. Would you fellows care to come over next Saturday evening? There'll be two or three others of our friends. I'll have this story off my chest by then, and we'll raise the roof."

Godfrey and Schuler accepted the invitation, and went out together. Since they both lived across the bay, in Oakland, and both were on their way home, they caught the same car to the ferry.

"Old Avilton is certainly a case of the living contradiction, if there ever was one," remarked Schuler. "Of course, no one quite believes in the occult or the necromantic nowadays; but anyone who can cook up such infernally realistic horrors, such thoroughgoing hair-frizzlers as he does, simply hasn't the right to be so cold-blooded about it. I claim that it's really indecent."

"I agree," rejoined his companion. "He's so damnably matter-of-fact that he arouses in me a sort of Hallowe'en impulse: I want to dress up

in an old sheet and play ghost or something, just to jar him out of that skeptical complacency of his."

"Ye gods and little ghosties!" cried Schuler. "I've got an inspiration. Remember what Avilton told us about the new story he's writing—about the serpent that comes to life?"

He unfolded the prankish idea he had conceived, and the two laughed like mischievous schoolboys plotting some novel deviltry.

"Why not? It should give the old lad a real thrill," chuckled Godfrey. "And he'll think that his fictions are more scientific than he ever dreamed before."

"I know where I can get one," said Schuler. "I'll put it in a fishing-creel, and hide the creel in my valise next Saturday when we go to Avilton's. Then we can watch our chance to make the substitution."

On Saturday evening the two friends arrived together at Avilton's house, and were admitted by a Japanese who combined in himself the roles of cook, butler, housekeeper and valet. The other guests, two young musicians, had already come, and Avilton, who was evidently in a mood for relaxation, was telling them a story, which, to judge from the continual interruptions of laughter, was not at all in the vein for which he had grown so famous. It seemed almost impossible to believe that he could be the author of the gruesome and brain-freezing horrors that bore his name.

The evening went successfully, with a good dinner, cards, and some pre-war Bourbon, and it was after midnight when Avilton saw his guests to their chambers, and sought his own.

Godfrey and Sculer did not go to bed, but sat up talking in the room they occupied together, till the house had grown silent and it was probable that everyone had fallen asleep. Avilton, they knew, was a sound sleeper, who boasted that even a rivet-factory or a brass orchestra could not keep him awake for five minutes after his head had touched the pillow.

"Now's our chance," whispered Schuler, at last. He had taken from his valise a fishing-creel, in which was a large and somewhat restless gopher-snake, and softly opening the door, which they had left ajar, the conspirators tiptoed down the hall toward Avilton's library, which lay at the farther end. It was their plan to leave the live gopher-snake in the library in lieu of the stuffed rattler, which they would remove. A go-

pher-snake is somewhat similar to a rattler in its markings; and, in order to complete the verisimilitude, Schuler had even provided himself with a set of rattlers, which he meant to attach with thread to the serpent's tail before freeing it. The substiution, they felt, would undoubtedly prove a trifle startling, even to a person of such boiler-plate nerves and unrelenting skepticism as Avilton.

As if to facilitate their scheme, the door of the library stood half open. Godfrey produced a flashlight, and they entered. Somehow, in spite of their merry mood, in spite of the schoolboy hoax they had planned and the Bourbon they had drunk, the shadow of something dim and sinister and disquieting fell on the two men as they crossed the threshold. It was like a premonition of some unknown and unexpected menace, lurking in the darkness of the book-peopled room where Avilton had woven so many of his weird and spectral webs. They both began to remember incidents of nocturnal horror from his stories—happenings that were ghoulishly hideous or necromantically strange and terrible. Now, such things seemed even more plausible than the author's diabolic art had made them heretofore. But neither of the men could have quite defined the feeling that came over them or could have assigned a reason for it.

"I feel a little creepy," confided Schuler, as they stood in the dark library. "Turn on that flashlight, won't you?"

The light fell directly on the low bookcase where the stuffed rattler had been coiled, but to their surprize, they found the serpent missing from its customary place.

"Where is the damned thing, anyway?" muttered Godfrey. He turned his light on the neighboring bookcases, and then on the floor and chairs in front of them, but without revealing the object of his search. At last, in its circlings, tht ray struck Avilton's writing-table, and they saw the snake, which, in some mood of grotesque humor, Avilton had evidently placed on his pile of manuscript to serve in lieu of a paperweight. Behind it gleamed the two serpentine candlesticks.

"Ah! there you are," said Schuler. He was about to open his creel when a singular and quite unforeseen thing occurred. He and Godfrey both saw a movement on the writing-table, and before their incredulous eyes the rattlesnake coiled on the pile of paper slowly raised its arrow-shaped head and darted forth its forky tongue! Its cold, unwinking

eyes, with a fixation of baleful intensity well-nigh hypnotic, were upon the intruders, and as they stared in unbelieving horror, they heard the sharp rattling of its tail, like withered seeds in a wind-swung pod.

"My God!" exclaimed Schuler. "The thing is alive!"

As he spoke, the flashlight fell from Godfrey's hand and went out, leaving them in soot-black darkness. As they stood for a moment, half petrified with astonishment and terror, they heard the rattling again, and then the sound of some object that seemed to strike the floor in falling. Once more, in a few instants, there came the sharp rattle, this time almost at their very feet.

Godfrey screamed aloud, and Schuler began to curse incoherently, as they both turned and ran toward the open door. Schuler was ahead, and as he crossed the threshold into the dim-lit hall, where one electric bulb still burned, he heard the crash of his companion's fall, mingled with a cry of such infinite terror, such atrocious agony, that his brain and his very marrow were turned to ice. In the paralyzing panic that overtook him, Schuler retained no faculty except that of locomotion, and it did not even occur to him that it would be possible to stop and ascertain what had befallen Godfrey. He had no thought, no desire, except to put the length of the hall between himself and that accursed library and its happenings.

Avilton, dressed in pajamas, stood at the door of his room. He had been aroused by Godfrey's scream of terror.

"What's the matter?" the story-writer queried, with a look of amiable surprize, which turned to a real gravity when he saw Schuler's face. Schuler was as white as a marble headstone and his eyes were preternaturally dilated.

"The snake!" Schuler gasped. "The snake! The snake! Something awful has happened to Godfrey—he fell with the thing just behind him."

"What snake? You don't mean my stuffed rattler by any chance, do you?"

"Stuffed rattler?" yelled Schuler. "The damned thing is alive! It came crawling after us, rattling under our very feet a moment ago. Then Godfrey stumbled and fell—and he didn't get up."

"I don't understand," purred Avilton. "The thing is a manifest impossibility—really quite contrary to all natural laws, I assure you. I

killed that snake four years ago, in El Dorado County, and had it stuffed by an expert taxidermist."

"Go and see for yourself," challenged Schuler.

Avilton strode immediately to the library and turned on the lights. Schuler, mastering a little his panic and his dreadful forebodings, followed at a cautious distance. He found Avilton stooping over the body of Godfrey, who lay quite still in a huddled and horribly contorted position near the door. Not far away was the abandoned fishing-creel. The stuffed rattlesnake was coiled in its customary place on top of the bookshelves.

Avilton, with a grave and brooding mien, removed his hand from Godfrey's heart, and observed:

"He's quite dead—shock and heart-failure, I should think."

Neither he nor Schuler could bear to look very long at Godfrey's upturned face, on which was stamped as with some awful brand or acid an expression of fear and suffering beyond all human capacity to endure. In their mutual desire to avoid the lidless horror of his dead staring, their eyes fell at the same instant on his right hand, which was clenched in a hideous rigidity and drawn close to his side.

Neither could utter a word when they saw the thing that protruded from between Godfrey's fingers. It was a bunch of rattles, and on the endmost one, where it had evidently been torn from the viper's tail, there clung several shreds of raw and bloody flesh.

THE SUPERNUMERARY CORPSE

IT IS not remorse that maddens me, that drives me to the penning of this more than indiscreet narrative, in the hope of finding a temporary distraction. I have felt no remorse for a crime to which justice itself impelled me. It is the damnable mystery, beyond all human reason or solution, upon which I have stumbled in the doing of this simple deed, in the mere execution of the justice whereof I speak—it is this that has brought me near insanity.

My motives in the killing of Jasper Trilt, though imperative, were far from extraordinary. He had wronged me enough, in the course of a twelve years' acquaintance, to warrant his death twice over. He had robbed me of the painfully garnered fruits of a lifetime of labor and research, had stolen, with lying promises, the chemical formulae that would have made me a wealthy man. Foolishly, I had trusted him, believing that he would share with me the profits of my precious knowledge—from which he was to acquire riches and renown. Poor and unknown, I could do nothing for my own redress.

Often I marvel at the long forbearance which I displayed toward Trilt. Something (was it the thought of ultimate revenge?) led me to ignore his betrayals, to dissemble my knowledge of his baseness. I continued to use the laboratory which he had equipped for me. I went on accepting the miserable pittance which he paid me for my toil. I made new discoveries—and I allowed him to cheat me of the usufruct.

Moreover, there was Norma Gresham, whom I had always loved in

my halting, inarticulate fashion, and who had seemed to like me well enough before Trilt began to pay her his dashing and gallant addresses. She had speedily forgotten the timid, poverty-stricken chemist, and had married Trilt. This, too, I pretended to ignore, but I could not forget. . . . As you see, my grievances were such as have actuated many others in the seeking of vengeance: they were in no sense unusual; and like everything else about the affair, they served by their very commonplaceness to throw into monstrous relief the abnormal and inexplicable outcome.

I cannot remember when it was that I first conceived the idea of killing my betrayer. It has been so long an integral part of my mental equipment, that I seem to have nurtured it from all pre-eternity. But the full maturing, the perfection of my murderous plans, is a thing of quite recent date.

For years, apart from my usual work, I have been experimenting with poisons. I delved in the remote arcana and by-ways of toxicology, I learned all that chemistry could tell me on the subject—and more. This branch of my research was wholly unknown to Trilt; and I did not intend that he should profit by anything that I had discovered or devised in the course of my investigations. In fact, my aims were quite different, in regard to him.

From the beginning, I had in mind certain peculiar requisites, which no poison familiar to science could fulfil. It was after endless groping and many failures that I succeeded in formulating a compound of rare toxic agents which would have the desired effect on the human system.

It was necessary, for my own security, that the poison should leave no trace, and should imitate closely the effects of some well-known malady, thus precluding even the chance of medical suspicion. Also, the victim must not die too quickly and mercifully. I devised a compound which, if taken internally, would be completely absorbed by the nervous system within an hour and would thereafter be indetectable through analysis. It would cause an immediate paralysis, and would present all the outward effects of a sudden and lethal stroke of apoplexy. However, the afflicted person—though seemingly insensible—would retain consciousness and would not die till the final absorption of the poison. Though utterly powerless to speak or move, he would still be able to hear and see, to understand—and suffer.

Even after I had perfected this agent, and had satisfied myself of its

efficacy, I delayed the crowning trial. It was not through fear or compunction that I waited: rather, it was because I desired to prolong the delicious joys of anticipation, the feeling of power it gave me to know that I could sentence my betrayer to his doom and could execute the sentence at will.

It was after many months—it was less than a fortnight ago—that I decided to withhold my vengeance no longer. I planned it all very carefully, with complete forethought; and I left no loophole for mischance or accident. There would be nothing, not even the most tenuous thread, that could ever lead any one to suspect me.

To arouse the cupidity of Trilt, and to insure his profound interest, I went to him and hinted that I was on the brink of a great discovery. I did not specify its nature, saying that I should reveal it all at the proper time, when success had been achieved. I did not invite him to visit the laboratory. Cunningly, by oblique hints, I stimulated his curiosity; and I knew that he would come. Perhaps my caution was excessive; but it must not even seem that I had prearranged the visit that would terminate in his seizure and death. I could, perhaps, have found opportunity to administer the poison in his own home, where I was still a fairly frequent caller. But I wished him to die in my presence and in the laboratory that had been the scene of my long, defrauded toils.

I knew, by a sort of prescience, the very evening when he would come, greedy to unearth my new secret. I prepared the draft that contained the poison—a chemist's glass of water colored with a little grenadine—and set it aside in readiness among my tubes and bottles. Then I waited.

The laboratory—an old and shabby mansion converted by Trilt to this purpose—lay in a well-wooded outskirt of the town, at no great distance from my employer's luxurious home. Trilt was a gourmand; and I knew that he would not arrive till well after the dinner hour. Therefore I looked for him about nine o'clock. He must indeed have been eager to filch my supposed new formula; for, half an hour before the expected time, I heard his heavy, insolent knock on the door of the rear room in which I was waiting amid my chemical apparatus.

He came in, gross and odious, with the purple overfeeding upon his puffy jowls. He wore an azure blue tie and a suit of pepper-and-salt—a close-fitting suit that merely emphasized the repulsive bulkiness of his figure.

"Well, Margrave, what is it now?" he asked. "Have you finished the

experiments you were hinting about so mysteriously? I hope you've really done something to earn your pay, this time."

"I have made a tremendous discovery," I told him, "nothing less than the elixir of the alchemists—the draft of eternal life and energy."

He was palpably startled, and gave me a sharp, incredulous stare.

"You are lying," he said, "or fooling yourself. Everyone knows, and has known since the Dark Ages, that the thing is a scientific impossibility."

"Others may lie," I said sardonically, "but it remains to be seen whether or not I have lied. That graduated glass which you see on the table is filled with the elixir."

He stared at the vessel which I had indicated.

"It looks like grenadine," he remarked, with a certain perspicacity.

"There is a superficial likeness—the color is the same. . . . But the stuff means immortality for any one who dares to drink it—also it means inexhaustible capacity for pleasure, a freedom from all satiety or weariness. It is everlasting life and joy."

He listened greedily. "Have you tried it yourself?"

"Yes, I have experimented with it," I countered.

He gave me a somewhat contemptuous and doubtful glance. "Well, you do look rather animated tonight—at least, more so than usual—and no so much like a mackerel that's gotten soured on life. The stuff hasn't killed you, at any rate. So I think I'll try it myself. It ought to be a pretty good commercial proposition, if it only does a tenth of what you say it will. We'll call it Trilt's Elixir."

"Yes," said I, slowly, echoing him: "Trilt's Elixir."

He reached for the glass and raised it to his lips.

"You guarantee the result?" he asked.

"The result will be all that one could desire," I promised, looking him full in the eyes, and smiling with an irony which he could not perceive.

He drained the glass at a gulp. Instantly, as I had calculated, the poison took effect. He staggered as if he had received a sudden, crushing blow, the empty vessel fell from his fingers with a crash, his heavy legs collapsed beneath him, he fell on the laboratory floor between the laden benches and tables, and lay without stirring again. His face was flushed and congested, his breathing stertorous, as in the malady whose effects I had chosen to simulate. His eyes were open—horribly open and glaring; but there was not even the least flicker of their lids.

Coolly, but with a wild exultation in my heart, I gathered up the

fragments of the broken glass and dropped them into the small heating-stove that stood at the room's end. Then, returning to the fallen and helpless man, I allowed myself the luxury of gloating over the dark, unutterable terror which I read in his paralytic gaze. Knowing that he could still hear and comprehend, I told him what I had done and listed the unforgotten wrongs which he thought I had accepted so supinely.

Then, as an added torture, I emphasized the indetectable nature of the poison, and I taunted him for his own folly in drinking the supposed elixir. All too quickly did the hour pass—the hour which I had allowed for the full absorption of the poison and the victim's death. The breathing of Trilt grew slower and fainter, his pulse faltered and became inaudible; and at last he lay dead. But the terror still appeared to dwell, dark and stagnant and nameless, in his ever-open eyes.

Now, as was part of my carefully laid plan, I went to the laboratory telephone. I intended to make two calls—one, to tell Norma, Trilt's wife, of his sudden and fatal seizure while visiting me—and the other, to summon a doctor.

For some indefinable reason, I called Norma first—and the outcome of our conversation was so bewildering, so utterly staggering, that I did not put in the second call.

Norma answered the telephone herself, as I had expected. Before I could frame the few short words that would inform her of Trilt's death, she cried out in a shaken, tremulous voice:

"I was just going to call you, Felton. Jasper died a few minutes ago, from an apoplectic stroke. It's all so terrible, and I am stunned by the shock. He came into the house about an hour ago, and dropped at my feet without saying a word. . . . I thought he had gone to see you—but he could hardly have done that and gotten back so quickly. Come at once, Felton."

The dumbfoundment which I felt was inexpressible. I think I must have stammered a little as I answered her:

"Are you sure—quite sure that it's Jasper?"

"Of course, it's incredible. But he is lying here on the library sofa—dead. I called a doctor when he was stricken; and the doctor is still here. But there is nothing more to be done."

It was impossible then for me to tell her, as I had intended—that Trilt had come to the laboratory—that his dead body was lying near me in the rear room at that moment. Indeed, I doubted my own senses,

doubted my very brain, as I hung up the telephone. Either I, or Norma, was the victim of some strange and unaccountable delusion.

Half expecting that the gross cadaver would have vanished like an apparition, I turned from the telephone—and saw it, supine and heavy, with stiffening limbs and features. I went over, I stooped above it and dug my fingers roughly into the flabby flesh to make sure that it was real—that Trilt's visit and the administering of the poison had not been a mere hallucination. It was Trilt himself who lay before me; no one could mistake the obese body, the sybaritic face and lips, even with the chill of death descending upon them. The corpse I had touched was all too solid and substantial.

It must be Norma, then, who was demented or dreaming, or who had made some incredible mistake. I should go to the house at once and learn the true explanation. There would be time enough afterward to do my own explaining.

There was no likelihood that any one would enter the laboratory in my absence. Indeed, there were few visitors at any time. With one backward look at the body, to assure myself anew of its materiality, I went out into the moonless evening and started toward my employer's residence.

I have no clear recollection of the short walk among shadowy trees and bushes and along the poorly litten streets with their scattered houses. My thoughts, as well as the external world, were a night-bound maze of baffling unreality and dubiety.

Into this maze I was plunged to an irremeable depth on my arrival. Norma, pale and stunned rather than grief-stricken (for I think she had long ceased to love Trilt), was at the door to meet me.

"I can't get over the suddenness of it," she said at once. "He seemed all right at dinnertime, and ate heartily, as usual. Afterward he went out, saying that he would walk as far as the laboratory and look in on you.

"He must have felt ill, and started back after he had gone halfway. I didn't even hear him come in. I can't understand how he entered the house so quietly. I was sitting in the library, reading, when I happened to look up, just in time to see him cross the room and fall senseless at my feet. He never spoke or moved after that."

I could say nothing as she led me to the library. I do not know what I had expected to find; but certainly no sane man, no modern scientist

and chemist, could have dreamed of what I saw—the body of Jasper Trilt, reposing still and stiff and cadaverous on the sofa: the same corpse, to all outward seeming, which I had left behind me in the laboratory!

The doctor, Trilt's family physician, whom Norma had summoned, was about to leave. He greeted me with a slight nod and a cursory, incurious glance.

"There's nothing whatever to be done," he said, "it's all over."

"But—it doesn't seem possible," I stammered. "Is it really Jasper Trilt—isn't there some mistake?"

The doctor did not seem to hear my question. With reeling senses, doubting my own existence, I went over to the sofa and examined the body, touching it several times to make sure—if assurance were possible—of its substantiality. The puffy, purplish features, the open, glaring eyes with the glacial terror, the suit of pepper-and-salt, the azure blue tie—all were identical with those I had seen and touched a few minutes previous, in another place. I could no longer doubt the materiality of the second corpse—I could not deny that the thing before me, to all intents and purposes, was Jasper Trilt. But in the very confirmation of its incredible identity, there lay the inception of a doubt that was infinitely hideous. . . .

A week has gone by since then—a week of unslumbering nightmare, of all-prevailing, ineluctable horror.

Going back to the laboratory, I found the corpse of Jasper Trilt on the floor, where he had fallen. Feverishly, I applied to it all possible tests: it was solid, clammy, gross, material, like the other. I dragged it into a dusty, little-used storeroom, among cobwebby cartons and boxes and bottles, and covered it with sacking.

For reasons that must be more than obvious, I dared not tell any one of its existence. No one, save myself, has ever seen it. No one—not even Norma—suspects the unimaginable truth. . . .

Later, I attended the funeral of Trilt, I saw him in his coffin, and as one of the pall-bearers I helped to carry the coffin and lower it into the grave. I can swear that it was tenanted by an actual body. And on the faces of the morticians and my fellow pall-bearers there was no shadow of doubt or misgiving as to the identity and reality of the corpse. But afterward, returning home, I lifted the sacking in the store-room, and

found that the thing beneath—cadaver or *ka, doppelgänger* or phantom, whatever it was—had not disappeared or undergone the least change.

Madness took me then for awhile, and I knew not what I did. Recovering my senses in a measure, I poured gallon after gallon of corrosive acids into a great tub; and in the tub I placed the thing that had been Jasper Trilt, or which bore the semblance of Trilt. But neither the clothing nor the body was affected in any degree by the mordant acid. And since then, the thing has shown no sign of normal decay, but remains eternally and inexplicably the same. Some night, before long, I shall bury it in the woods behind the laboratory; and the earth will receive Trilt for the second time. After that my crime will be doubly indetectable—if I have really committed a crime, and have not dreamed it all or become the victim of some hallucinative brain-disease.

I have no explanation for what has happened, nor do I believe that any such can be afforded by the laws of a sane universe. But—is there any proof that the universe itself is sane, or subject to rational laws?

Perhaps there are inconceivable lunacies in chemistry itself, and drugs whose action is a breach of all physical logic. The poison that I administered to Trilt was an unknown quantity, apart from its deadliness, and I cannot be wholly sure of its properties, of its possible effect on the atoms of the human body—and the atoms of the soul. Indeed, I can be sure of nothing, except that I too, like the laws of matter, must go altogether mad in a little while.

THE MANDRAKES

GILLES GRENIER the sorcerer and his wife Sabine, coming into lower Averoigne from parts unknown or at least unverified, had selected the location of their hut with a careful forethought.

The hut was close to those marshes through which the slackening waters of the river Isoile, after leaving the great forest, had overflowed in sluggish, reed-clogged channels and sedge-hidden pools mantled with scum like witches' oils. It stood among osiers and alders on a low, mound-shaped elevation; and in front, toward the marshes, there was a loamy meadow-bottom where the short fat stems and tufted leaves of the mandrake grew in lush abundance, being more plentiful and of greater size than elsewhere through all that sorcery-ridden province. The fleshly, bifurcated roots of this plant, held by many to resemble the human body, were used by Gilles and Sabine in the brewing of love-philtres. Their potions, being compounded with much care and cunning, soon acquired a marvelous renown among the peasants and villagers, and were even in request among people of a loftier station, who came privily to the wizard's hut. They would rouse, people said, a kindly warmth in the coldest and most prudent bosom, would melt the armor of the most obdurate virtue. As a result, the demand for these sovereign magistrals became enormous.

The couple dealt also in other drugs and simples, in charms and divination; and Gilles, according to common belief, could read infallibly the dictates of the stars. Oddly enough, considering the temper of the

Fifteenth Century, when magic and witchcraft were still so widely reprobated, he and his wife enjoyed a repute by no means ill or unsavory. No charges of malefice were brought against them; and because of the number of honest marriages promoted by the philtres, the local clergy were content to disregard the many illicit amours that had come to a successful issue through the same agency.

It is true, there were those who looked askance at Gilles in the beginning, and who whispered fearfully that he had been driven out of Blois, where all persons bearing the name Grenier were popularly believed to be werewolves. They called attention to the excessive hairiness of the wizard, whose hands were black with bristles and whose beard grew almost to his eyes. Such insinuations, however, were generally considered as lacking proof, insomuch as no other signs or marks of lycanthropy were ever displayed by Gilles. And in time, for reasons that have been sufficiently indicated, the few detractors of Gilles were wholly overborne by a secret but widespread sentiment of public favor.

Even by their patrons, very little was known regarding the strange couple, who maintained the reserve proper to those who dealt in mystery and enchantment. Sabine, a comely women with blue-gray eyes and wheat-colored hair, and no trace of the traditional witch in her appearance, was obviously much younger than Gilles, whose sable mane and beard were already touched with the white warp of time. It was rumored by visitors that she had oftentimes been overheard in sharp dispute with her husband; and people soon made a jest of this, remarking that the philtres might well be put to a domestic use by those who purveyed them. But aside from such rumors and ribaldries, little was thought of the matter. The connubial infelicities of Gilles and his wife, whether grave or trivial, in no wise impaired the renown of their love-potions.

Also, little was thought of Sabine's presence, when, five years after the coming of the pair into Averoigne, it became remarked by neighbors and customers that Gilles was alone. In reply to queries, the sorcerer merely said that his spouse had departed on a long journey, to visit relatives in a remote province. The explanation was accepted without debate, and it did not occur to any one that there had been no eye-witnesses of Sabine's departure.

It was then mid-autumn; and Gilles told the inquirers, in a somewhat vague and indirect fashion, that his wife would not return before

spring. Winter came early that year and tarried late, with deeply crusted snows in the forest and on the uplands, and a heavy armor of fretted ice on the marshes. It was a winter of much hardship and privation. When the tardy spring had broken the silver buds of the willows and covered the alders with a foliage of chrysolite, few thought to ask Gilles regarding Sabine's return. And later, when the purple bells of the mandrake were succeeded by small orange-colored apples, her prolonged absence was taken for granted.

Gilles, living tranquilly with his books and cauldrons, and gathering the roots and herbs for his magical medicaments, was well enough pleased to have it taken for granted. He did not believe that Sabine would ever return; and his unbelief, it would seem, was far from irrational. He had killed her one even in autumn, during a dispute of unbearable acrimony, slitting her soft,, pale throat in self-defense with a knife which he had wrested from her fingers when she lifted it against him. Afterward he had buried her by the late rays of a gibbous moon beneath the mandrakes in the meadow-bottom, replacing the leafy sods with much care, so that there was no evidence of their having been disturbed other than by the digging of a few roots in the way of daily business.

After the melting of the long snows from the meadow, he himself could scarcely have been altogether sure of the spot in which he had interred her body. He noticed, however, as the season drew on, that there was a place where the mandrakes grew with even more than their wonted exuberance; and this place, he believed, was the very site of her grave. Visiting it often, he smiled with a secret irony, and was pleased rather than troubled by the thought of that charnel nourishment which might have contributed to the lushness of the dark, glossy leaves. In fact, it may well have been a similar irony that had led him to choose the mandrake meadow as a place of burial for the murdered witch-wife.

Gilles Grenier was not sorry that he had killed Sabine. They had been ill-mated from the beginning, and the woman had shown toward him in their quotidian quarrels the venomous spitefulness of a very hell-cat. He had not loved the vixen; and it was far pleasanter to be alone, with his somewhat somber temper unruffled by her acrid speeches, and his sallow face and grizzling beard untorn by her sharp finger-nails.

With the renewal of spring, as the sorcerer had expected, there was

much demand for his love-philtres among the smitten swains and lasses of the neighborhood. There came to him, also, the gallants who sought to overcome a stubborn chastity, and the wives who wished to recall a wandering fancy or allure the forbidden desires of young men. Anon, it became necessary for Gilles to replenish his stock of mandrake potions; and with this purpose in mind, he went forth at midnight beneath the full May moon, to dig the newly grown roots from which he would brew his amatory enchantments.

Smiling darkly beneath his beard, he began to cull the great, moon-pale plants which flourished on Sabine's grave, digging out the homunculus-like taproots very carefully with a curious trowel made from the femur of a witch.

Though he was well used to the weird and often vaguely human forms assumed by the mandrake, Gilles was somewhat surprized by the appearance of the first root. It seemed inordinately large, unnaturally white; and, eyeing it more closely, he saw that it bore the exact likeness of a woman's body and lower limbs, being cloven to the middle and clearly formed even to the ten toes! There were no arms, however, and the bosom ended in the large tuft of ovate leaves.

Gilles was more than startled by the fashion in which the root seemed to turn and writhe when he lifted it from the ground. He dropped it hastily, and the minikin limbs lay quivering on the grass. But, after a little reflection, he took the prodigy as a possible mark of Satanic favor, and continued his digging. To his amazement, the next root was formed in much the same manner as the first. A half-dozen more, which he proceeded to dig, were shaped in miniature mockery of a woman from breasts to heels; and amid the superstituous awe and wonder with which he regarded them, he became aware of their singularly intimate resemblance to Sabine.

At this discovery, Gilles was deeply perturbed, for the thing was beyond his comprehension. The miracle, whether divine or demoniac, began to assume a sinister and doubtful aspect. It was as if the slain women herself had returned, or had somehow wrought her unholy simulacrum in the mandrakes.

His hand trembled as he started to dig up another plant; and working with less than his usual care, he failed to remove the whole of the bifurcated root, cutting into it clumsily with the trowel of sharp bone.

He saw that he had severed one of the tiny ankles. At the same in-

stant, a shrill, reproachful cry, like the voice of Sabine herself in mingled pain and anger, seemed to pierce his ears with intolerable acuity, though the volume was strangely lessened, as if the voice had come from a distance. The cry ceased, and was not repeated. Gilles, sorely terrified, found himself staring at the trowel, on which there was a dark, blood-like stain. Trembling, he pulled out the severed root, and saw that it was dripping with a sanguine fluid.

At first, in his dark fear and half-guilty apprehension he thought of burying the roots which lay palely before him with their eldritch and obscene similitude to the dead sorceress. He would hide them deeply from his own sight and the ken of others, lest the murder he had done should somehow be suspected.

Presently, however, his alarm began to lessen. It occurred to him that, even if seen by others, the roots would be looked upon merely as a freak of nature and would in no manner serve to betray his crime, since their actual resemblance to the person of Sabine was a thing which none but he could rightfully know.

Also, he thought, the roots might well possess an extraordinary virtue, and from them, perhaps, he would brew philtres of never-equalled power and efficacy. Overcoming entirely his initial dread and repulsion, he filled a small osier basket with the quivering, leaf-headed figurines. Then he went back to his hut, seeing in the bizarre phenomenon merely the curious advantage to which it might be turned, and wholly oblivious to any darker meaning, such as might have been read by others in his place.

In his callous hardihood, he was not disquieted overmuch by the profuse bleeding of a sanguine matter from the mandrakes when he came to prepare them for his cauldron. The ungodly, furious hissing, the mad foaming and boiling of the brew, like a devil's broth, he ascribed to the unique potency of its ingredients. He even dared to choose the most shapely and perfect of the woman-like plants, and hung it up in his hut amid other roots and dried herbs and simples, intending to consult it as an oracle in future, according to the custom of wizards.

The new philtres which he had concocted were bought by eager customers, and Gilles ventured to recommend them for their surpassing virtue, which would kindle amorous warmth in a bosom of marble or enflame the very dead.

Now, in the old legend of Averoigne which I recount herewith, it is

told that the impious and audacious wizard, fearing neither God nor devil nor witch-woman, dared to dig again in the earth of Sabine's grave, removing many more of the white, female-shapen roots, which cried aloud in shrill complaint to the waning moon or turned like living limbs at his violence. And all those which he dug were formed alike, in the miniature image of the dead Sabine from breasts to toes. And from them, it is said, he compounded other philtres, which he meant to sell in time when such should be requested.

As it happened, however, these latter potions were never dispensed; and only a few of the first were sold, owing to the frightful and calamitous consequences that followed their use. For those to whom the potions had been administered privily, whether men or women, were not moved by the genial fury of desire, as was the wonted result, but were driven by a darker rage, by a woful and Satanic madness, irresistibly impelling them to harm or even slay the persons who had sought to attract their love.

Husbands were turned against wives, lasses against their lovers, with speeches of bitter hate and scatheful deeds. A certain young gallant who had gone to the promised rendezvous was met by a vengeful madwoman, who tore his face into bleeding shreds with her nails. A mistress who had thought to win back her recreant knight was mistreated foully and done to death by him who had hitherto been impeccably gentle, even if faithless.

The scandal of these untoward happenings was such as would attend an invasion of demons. The crazed men and women, it was thought at first, were veritably possessed by devils. But when the use of the potions became rumored, and their provenance was clearly established, the burden of the blame fell upon Gilles Grenier, who, by the law of both church and state, was now charged with sorcery.

The constables who went to arrest Gilles found him at evening in his hut of raddled osiers, stooping and muttering above a cauldron that foamed and hissed and boiled as if it had been filled with the spate of Phlegethon. They entered and took him unaware. He submitted calmly, but expressed surprize when told of the lamentable effect of the love-philtres; and he neither affirmed nor denied the charge of wizardry.

As they were about to leave with their prisoner, the officers heard a shrill, tiny, shrewish voice that cried from the shadows of the hut, where bunches of dried simples and other sorcerous ingredients were

hanging. It appeared to issue from a strange, half-withered root, cloven in the very likeness of a woman's body and legs—a root that was partly pale, and partly black with cauldron-smoke. One of the constables thought that he recognized the voice as being that of Sabine, the sorcerer's wife. All swore that they heard the voice clearly, and were able to distinguish these words:

"Dig deeply in the meadow, where the mandrakes grow the thickliest."

The officers were sorely frightened, both by this uncanny voice and the obscene likeness of the root, which they regarded as a work of Satan. Also, there was much doubt anent the wisdom of obeying the oracular injunction. Gilles, who was questioned narrowly as to its meaning, refused to offer any interpretation; but certain marks of perturbation in his manner finally led the officers to examine the mandrake meadow below the hut.

Digging by lantern-light in the specified spot, they found many more of the roots, which seemed to crowd the ground; and beneath, they came to the rotting corpse of a woman, which was still recognizable as that of Sabine. As a result of this discovery, Gilles Grenier was arraigned not only for sorcery but also for the murder of his wife. He was readily convicted of both crimes, though he denied stoutly the imputation of intentional malefice, and claimed to the very last that he had killed Sabine only in defense of his own life against her termagant fury. He was hanged on the gibbet in company with other murderers, and his dead body was then burned at the stake.

THIRTEEN PHANTASMS

"I HAVE been faithful to thee, Cynara, in my fashion."

John Alvington tried to raise himself on the pillow as he murmured in his thoughts the long-familiar refrain of Dowson's lyric. But his head and shoulders fell back in an overflooding helplessness, and there trickled through his brain, like a thread of icy water, the realization that perhaps the doctor had been right—perhaps the end was indeed imminent. He thought briefly of embalming fluids, immortelles, coffin nails and falling sods; but such ideas were quite alien to his trend of mind, and he preferred to think of Elspeth. He dismissed his mortuary musings with an appropriate shudder.

He often thought of Elspeth, these days. But of course he had never really forgotten her at any time. Many people called him a rake; but he knew, and had always known, that they were wrong. It was said that he had broken, or materially dented, the hearts of twelve women, including those of his two wives; and strangely enough, in view of the exaggerations commonly characteristic of gossip, the number was correct. Yet he, John Alvington, knew to a certainty that only one woman, who no one reckoned among the twelve, had ever really mattered in his life.

He had loved Elspeth and no one else; he had lost her through a boyish quarrel which was never made up, and she had died a year later. The other women were all mistakes, mirages: they had attracted him only because he fancied, for varying periods, that he had found in them something of Elspeth. He had been cruel to them perhaps, and most

certainly he had not been faithful. But in forsaking them, had he not been all the truer to Elspeth?

Somehow his mental image of her was more distinct today than in years. As if a gathering dust had been wiped away from a portrait, he saw with strange clearness the elfin teasing of her eyes and the light tossing of brown curls that always accompanied her puckish laughter. She was tall—unexpectedly tall for so fairy-like a person, but all the more admirable thereby; and he had never liked any but tall women.

How often he had been startled, as if by a ghost, in meeting some women with a similar mannerism, a similar figure or expression of eyes or cadence of voice; and how complete had been his disillusionment when he came to see the unreality and fallaciousness of the resemblance. How irreparably she, the true love, had come sooner or later between him and all the others.

He began to recall things that he had almost forgotten, such as the carnelian cameo brooch she had worn on the day of their first meeting, and a tiny mole on her left shoulder, of which he had once had a glimpse when she was wearing a dress unusually low-necked for that period. He remembered too the plain gown of pale green that clung so deliciously to her slender form on that morning when he had flung away with a curt good-bye, never to see her again. . . .

Never, he thought to himself, had his memory been so good: surely the doctor was mistaken, for there was no failing of his faculties. It was quite impossible that he should be mortally ill, when he could summon all his recollections of Elspeth with such ease and clarity.

Now he went over all the days of their seven months' engagement, which might have ended in a felicitous marriage if it had not been for her propensity to take unreasonable offense, and for his own answering flash of temper and want of conciliatory tactics in the crucial quarrel. How near, how poignant it all seemed. He wondered what malign providence had ordered their parting and had sent him on a vain quest from face to illusory face for the remainder of his life.

He did not, could not remember the other women—only that he had somehow dreamed for a little while that they resembled Elspeth. Others might consider him a Don Juan: but he knew himself for a hopeless sentimentalist, if there ever had been one.

What was that sound? he wondered. Had someone opened the door of the room? It must be the nurse, for no one else ever came at that

hour in the evening. The nurse was a nice girl, though not at all like Elspeth. He tried to turn a little so that he could see her, and somehow succeeded, by a titanic effort altogether disproportionate to the feeble movement.

It was not the nurse after all, for she was always dressed in immaculate white befitting her profession. This woman wore a dress of cool, delectable green, pale as the green of shoaling sea-water. He could not see her face, for she stood with back turned to the bed; but there was something oddly familiar in that dress, something that he could not quite remember at first. Then, with a distinct shock, he knew that it resembled the dress worn by Elspeth on the day of their quarrel, the same dress he had been picturing to himself a little while before. No one ever wore a gown of that length and style nowadays. Who on earth could it be? There was a queer familiarity about her figure, too, for she was quite tall and slender.

The woman turned, and John Alvington saw that it was Elspeth—the very Elspeth from whom he had parted with a bitter farewell, and who had died without ever permitting him to see her again. Yet how could it be but Elspeth, when she had been dead so long? Then, by a swift transition of logic, how could she have ever died, since she was here before him now? It seemed so infinitely preferable to believe that she still lived, and he wanted so much to speak to her, but his voice failed him when he tried to utter her name.

Now he thought that he heard the door open again, and became aware that another woman stood in the shadows behind Elspeth. She came forward, and he observed that she wore a green dress identical in every detail with that worn by his beloved. She lifted her head—and the face was that of Elspeth, with the same teasing eyes and whimsical mouth! But how could there be two Elspeths?

In profound bewilderment, he tried to accustom himself to the bizarre idea; and even as he wrestled with a problem so unaccountable, a third figure in pale green, followed by a fourth and a fifth came in and stood beside the first two. Nor were these the last, for others entered one by one, till the room was filled with woman, all of whom wore the raiment and the semblance of his dead sweetheart. None of them uttered a word, but all looked at Alvington with a gaze in which he now seemed to discern a deeper mockery than the elfin tantalizing he had once found in the eyes of Elspeth.

He lay very still, fighting with a dark, terrible perplexity. How could there be such a multitude of Elspeths, when he could remember knowing only one? And how many were there, anyway? Something prompted him to count them, and he found that there were thirteen of the specters in green. And having ascertained this fact, he was struck by something familiar about the number? Didn't people say that he had broken the hearts of thirteen women? Or was the total only twelve? Anyway, if you counted Elspeth herself, who had really broken his heart, there would be thirteen.

Now all the woman began to toss their curly heads, in a manner he recalled so well, and all of them laughed with a light and puckish laughter. Could they be laughing at him? Elspeth had often done that but he had loved her devotedly nevertheless. . . .

All at once, he began to feel uncertain about the precise number of figures that filled his room; it seemed to him at one moment that there were more than he had counted, and then that there were fewer. He wondered which one among them was the true Elspeth, for after all he felt sure that there had never been a second—only a series of women apparently resembling her, who were not really like her at all when you came to know them.

Finally, as he tried to count them and scrutinize the thronging faces, all of them grew dim and confused and indistinct, and he half forgot what he was trying to do. . . . Which one was Elspeth? Or had there ever been a real Elspeth? He was not sure of anything at the last, when oblivion came, and he passed to that realm in which there are neither women nor phantoms nor love nor numerical problems.

AN OFFERING TO THE MOON

"I BELIEVE," announced Morley, "that the roofless temples of Mu were not all devoted to solar worship, but that many of them were consecrated to the moon. And I am sure that the one we have now discovered proves my point. These hieroglyphics are lunar symbols beyond a doubt."

Thorway, his fellow-archaeologist, looked at Morley with a surprise not altogether due to the boldly authoritative pronouncement. He was struck anew by the singularity of Morley's tones and expression. The dreamy, beardless, olive features, that seemed to repeat some aboriginal Aryan type, were transfigured by a look of ecstatic absorption. Thorway himself was not incapable of enthusiasm when the occasion seemed to warrant it; but this well-nigh religious ardor was beyond his comprehension. He wondered (not for the only time) if his companion's mentality were not a trifle . . . eccentric.

However, he mumbled a rejoinder that was deferential even though non-committal. Morley had not only financed the expedition, but had been paying a liberal stipend to Thorway for more than two years. So Thorway could afford to be respectful, even though he was a little tired of his employer's odd and unauthorized notions, and the interminable series of sojourns they had made on Melanesian isles. From the monstrous and primordial stone images of Easter Island to the truncated pyramidal columns of the Ladrones, they had visited all the far-strewn remains which are held to prove the former existence of a great conti-

nent in the mid-Pacific. Now, on one of the lesser Marquesas, hitherto unexplored, they had located the massive walls of a large temple-like edifice. As usual, it had been difficult to find, for such places were universally feared and shunned by the natives, who believed them haunted by the immemorial dead, and could not be hired to visit them or even to reveal their whereabouts. It was Morley who had stumbled upon the place, almost as if he were led by a subconscious instinct.

Truly, they had made a significant discovery, as even Thorway was compelled to admit. Except for a few of the colossal topmost stones, which had fallen or splintered away, the walls were in well-nigh perfect preservation. The place was surrounded by a tangle of palms and jackfruit and various tropical shrubs; but somehow none of them had taken root within the walls. Portions of a paved floor were still extant, amid centurial heaps of rubble. In the center was a huge, square block, rising four feet above the ground-level, which might well have served as an altar. It was carved with rude symbols which appeared to represent the moon in all its digits, and was curiously grooved across the top from the middle to one side with a trough that became deeper toward the edge. Like all other buildings of the sort, it was plain that the temple had never supported a roof.

"Yes, the symbols are undoubtedly lunar," admitted Thorway.

"Also," Morley went on, "I believe that rites of human sacrifice were performed in these temples. Oblations of blood were poured not only to the sun but to the moon."

"The idea is maintainable, of course," rejoined Thorway. "Human sacrifice was pretty widespread at a certain stage of evolution. It may well have been practiced by the people who built this edifice."

Morley did not perceive the dryness and formality of his confrere's assent. He was preoccupied with feelings and ideas, some of which could hardly have been the natural result of his investigations. Even as in visiting many others of the ancient remains, he had been troubled by a nervous agitation which was a compound of irresoluble awe and terror, of nameless, eager fascination and expectancy. Here, among these mighty walls, the feeling became stronger than it had been anywhere else; and it mounted to a pitch that was veritably distracting, and akin to the disturbed awareness that ushers in the illusions of delirium.

His idea, that the temple was a place of lunar worship, had seized him almost with the authority of an actual recollection, rather than a

closely reasoned inference. Also, he was troubled by sensory impressions that bordered upon the hallucinative. Though the day was tropically warm, he was conscious of a strange chill that emanated from the walls —a chill as of bygone cycles; and it seemed to him that the narrow shadows wrought by a meridian sun were peopled with unseen faces. More than once, he was prompted to rub his eyes, for ghostly films of color, like flashes of yellow and purple garments, came and went in the most infinitesimal fraction of time. Though the air was utterly still, he had the sense of perpetual movement all around him, of the passing to and fro of intangible throngs. It was many thousand years, in all likelihood, since human feet had trodden these pavements; but Morley could have cried aloud with the imminence of the long-dead ages. It appeared to him, in a brief glimpse, that his whole life, as well as his journeyings and explorations in the South Seas, had been but a devious return to some earlier state of being; and that the resumption of this state was now at hand. All this, however, continued to perplex him mightily: it was as if he had suffered the intrusion of an alien entity.

He heard himself speaking to Thorway, and the words were unfamiliar and remote, as if they had issued from the lips of another.

"They were a joyous and a child-like race, those people of Mu," he was saying; "but not altogether joyous, not wholly child-like. There was a dark side . . .and a dark worship—the cult of death and night, personified by the moon, whose white, implacable, frozen lips were appeased only by the warm blood that flowed upon her altars. They caught the blood in goblets as it ran from the stone grooves . . . they raised it aloft . . . and the goblets were swiftly drained in mid-air by the remote goddess, as if the sacrifice had proven acceptable."

"But how do you know all this?" Thorway was quite amazed, no less by his companion's air than by the actual words. Morley, he thought, was less like a modern, every-day American than ever. He remembered, inconsequently, how all the natives of the various island groups had taken to Morley with an odd friendliness, without the reserve and suspicion often accorded to other white men. They had even warned Morley against the guardian spirits of the ruins—and they did not always trouble to warn others. It was almost as if they regarded him as being in some manner akin to themselves. Thorway wondered . . . though he was essentially unimaginative.

"I tell you, I *know*," Morley said, as he walked up and down beside

the altar. "I have seen . . ." his voice trailed off in a frozen whisper, and he seemed to stiffen in every limb, and stood still as with some momentary catelepsy. His face grew deadly pale, his eyes were set and staring. Then, from between rigid lips, he uttered the strange words, *"Rhalu muvasa than,"* in a monotonous, hieratic tone, like a sort of invocation.

Morley could not have told what it was that he felt and saw in that moment. He was no longer his known and wonted self; and the man beside him was an unheeded stranger. But he could remember nothing afterwards—not even the odd vocables he had uttered. Whatever his mental experience may have been, it was like a dream that fades instantly when one awakens. The moment passed, the extreme rigidity left his limbs and features, and he resumed his interrupted pacing.

His confrere was staring at him in astonishment, not unmingled with solicitude.

"Are you ill? The sun is pretty hot today. And one should be careful. Perhaps we had best return to the schooner."

Morley gave a mechanical assent and followed Thorway from the ruins towards the seashore, where the schooner they had used in their voyaging was anchored in a little harbor less than a mile distant. His mind was full of confusion and darkness. He no longer felt the queer emotions that had seized him beside the altar; nor could he recall them otherwise than dimly. All the while he was trying to recollect something which lay just below the rim of memory; something very momentous, which he had forgotten long, long ago.

Lying in a cane couch beneath an awning on the schooner's deck, Morley drifted back to his normal plane of consciousness. He was not unwilling to accept Thorway's suggestion, that he had suffered a touch of sun among the ruins. His ghostly sensations, the delirium-like approach to a state of awareness which had no relation to his daily life, were now unlikely and unreal. In an effort to dismiss them altogether, he went over in his mind the whole of the investigative tour he had undertaken, and the events of the years preceding it.

He remembered his youthful luctations against poverty, his desire for that wealth and leisure which alone makes possible the pursuit of every chimera; and his slow but accelerative progress when once he had acquired a modicum of capital and had gone into business for himself as an importer of Oriental rugs. Then he recalled the chance inception of

his archaeological enthusiasm—the reading of an illustrated article which described the ancient remains on Easter Island. The insoluble strangeness of these little-known relics had thrilled him profoundly, though he knew not why; and he had resolved to visit them some day. The theory of a lost continent in the Pacific appealed to him with an almost intimate lure and imaginative charm; it became his own particular chimera, though he could not have traced to their psychal origin the feelings behind his interest. He read everything procurable on the subject; and as soon as his leisure permitted, he made a trip to Easter Island. A year later, he was able to leave his business indefinitely in the hands of an efficient manager. He hired Thorway, a professional archaeologist with much experience in Italy and Asia Minor, to accompany him; and purchasing an old schooner, manned by a Swedish crew and captain, he had set out on his long, devious voyage among the islands.

Going over all this in his thoughts, Morley decided that it was now time to return home. He had learned all that was verifiable regarding the mysterious ruins. The study had fascinated him as nothing else in his life had ever done; but for some reason his health was beginning to suffer. Perhaps he had thrown himself too assiduously into his labors; the ruins had absorbed him too deeply. He must get away from them, must not risk a renewal of the queer, delusory sensations he had experienced. He recalled the superstitions of the natives, and wondered if there were something in them after all; if unwholesome influences were attached to those primeval stones. Did ghosts return or linger from a world that had been buried beneath the waves for unknown ages? Damn it, had had almost felt at times as if he were some sort of *revenant* himself.

He called to Thorway, who was standing beside the rail in conversation with one of the Norse sailors.

"I think we have done enough for one voyage, Thorway," he said. "We will lift anchor in the morning and return to San Francisco."

Thorway made little effort to conceal his relief. He did not consider the Polynesian isles a very fruitful field for research: the ruins were too old and fragmentary, the period to which they belonged was too conjectural, and did not deeply engage his interest.

"I agree," he rejoined. "Also, if you will pardon me for saying it, I don't think the South Sea climate is one of ideal salubriousness. I've noticed occasionally indispositions on your part for some time past."

Morley nodded in a weary acquiescence. It would have been impossible to tell Thorway his actual thoughts and emotions. The man was abysmally unimaginative.

He only hoped that Thorway did not think him a little mad—though, after all, it was quite immaterial.

The day wore on; and the swift, purpureal darkness of eventide was curtailed by the rising of a full moon which inundated sea and land with warm, ethereous quicksilver. At dinner, Morley was lost in a taciturn abstraction; and Thorway was discreetly voluble, but made no reference to the late archaeological find. Svensen, the captain, who ate with them, maintained a monosyllabic reticence, even when he was told of the proposed return to San Francisco. After eating, Morley excused himself and went back to the cane couch. Somewhat to his relief, he was not joined by Thorway.

Moonlight had always aroused in Morley a vague but profound emotion. Even as the ruins had done, it stirred among the shadows of his mind a million ghostly intimations; and the thrill he felt was at times not unalloyed with a cryptic awe and trepidation, akin, perhaps, to the primal fear of darkness itself.

Now, as he gazed at the tropic plenilune, he conceived the sudden and obsessing idea that the orb was somehow larger, and its light more brilliant than usual; even as they might have been in ages when the moon and earth were much younger. Then he was possessed by a troublous doubt, by an inenarrable sense of dislocation, and a dream-like vagueness which attached itself to the world about him. A wave of terror surged upon him, and he felt that he was slipping irretrievably away from all familiar things. Then the terror ebbed; for that which he had lost was far off and incredible; and a world of circumstances long-forgot was assuming, or resuming, the tinge of familiarity.

What, he wondered, was he doing on this queer ship? It was the night of the sacrifice to Rhalu, the selenic goddess; and he, Matla, was to play an essential part in the ceremony. He must reach the temple ere the moon had mounted to her zenith above the altar-stone. And it now lacked only an hour of the appointed time.

He rose and peered about with questioning eyes. The deck was deserted, for it was unnecessary to keep watch in that tranquil harbor. Svensen and the mate were doubtless drinking themselves to sleep as usual; the sailors were playing their eternal whist and pedro; and Thor-

was was in his cabin, probably writing a no-less-eternal monograph on Etruscan tombs. It was only in the most remote and exiguous manner that Morley recollected their existence.

Somehow, he managed to recall that there was a boat which he and Thorway had used in their visits to the isle; and that this boat was moored to the schooner's side. With a tread as lithe and supple as that of a native, he was over the rail and was rowing silently shoreward. A hundred yards, or little more, and then he stood on the moon-washed sand.

Now he was climbing the palm-clustered hill above the shore, and was heading toward the temple. The air was suffused with a primal, brooding warmth, with the scent of colossal flowers and ferns not known to modern botanists. He could see them towering beside his way with their thick, archaic fronds and petals, though such things have not lifted to the moon for aeons. And mounting the crest of the hill, which had dominated the little isle and had looked down to the sea on two sides, he saw in the mellow light the far, unbounded reaches of a softly rolling plain, and sealess horizons everywhere, that glowed with the golden fires of cities. And he knew the names of these cities, and recalled the opulent life of Mu, whose prosperity had of late years been menaced by Atlantean earthquakes and volcanic upheavals. These, it was believed, were owing to the wrath of Rhalu, the goddess who controlled the planetary forces; and human blood was being poured in all her fanes to placate the mysterious deity.

Morley (or Matla) could have remembered a million things; he could have called to mind the simple but strange events of his entire pre-existence in Mu, and the lore and history of the far-flung continent. But there was little room in his consciousness for anything but the destined drama of the night. Long ago (how long he was not sure) he had been chosen among his people for an awful honor; but his heart had failed him ere the time ordained, and he had fled. Tonight, however, he would not flee. A solemn religious rapture, not untinged with fear, guided his steps toward the temple of the goddess.

As he went on, he noticed his raiment, and was puzzled. Why was he wearing these ugly and unseemly garments? He began to remove them and to cast them aside one by one. Nakedness was ordained by sacerdotal law for the role he was to play.

He heard the soft-vowelled murmur of voices about him, and saw the

multi-colored robes or gleaming amber flesh of forms that flitted among the archaic plants. The priests and worshippers were also on their way to the temple.

His excitement rose, it became more mystical and more rhapsodic as he neared his destination. His being was flooded by the superstitious awe of ancient man, by the dreadful reverence due to the unknown powers of nature. He peered with a solemn trepidation at the moon as it rose higher in the heavens, and saw in its rounded orb the features of a divinity both benign and malevolent.

Now he beheld the temple, looming whitely above the tops of titan fronds. The walls were no longer ruinous, their fallen blocks were wholly restored. His visit to the place with Thorway was dim as a fever fantasy; but other visits during his life as Matla, and ceremonials of the priests of Rhalu which he had once beheld, were clear and immediate in his memory. He knew the faces he would see, and the ritual wherein he would participate. He thought mostly in pictures; but the words of a strange vocabulary were ready for his recollection; and phrases drifted through his mind with unconscious ease; phrases that would have seemed unintelligible gibberish an hour before.

Matla was aware of the concentrated gaze of several hundred eyes as he entered the great, roofless fane. The place was thronged with people, whose round features were of a pre-Aryan type; and many of the faces were familiar to him. But at that moment all of them were parcel of a mystic horror, and were awesome and obscure as the night. Nothing was clear before him, save an opening in the throng, which led to the altar-stone around which the priests of Rhalu were gathered, and wherein Rhalu herself looked down in relentless, icy splendor from an almost vertical elevation.

He went forward with firm steps. The priests, who were clad in lunar purple and yellow, received him in an impassive silence. Counting them, he found that there were only six instead of the usual seven. One there was among them who carried a large, shallow goblet of silver; but the seventh, whose hand would lift the long and curving knife of some copperish metal, had not yet arrived.

Thorway had found it curiously hard to apply himself to the half-written monograph on Etruscan tombs. An obscure and exasperating restlessness finally impelled him to abandon his wooing of the reluctant muse of archaeology. In a state of steadily mounting irritation, wishing

that the bothersome and unprofitable voyage were over, he went on deck.

The moonlight dazzled him with its preternatural brilliance, and he did not perceive for a few moments that the cane couch was empty. When he saw that Morley was gone, he experienced a peculiar mixture of alarm and irritation. He felt sure that Morley had not returned to his cabin. Stepping to the schooner's shoreward side, he noted with little surprise the absence of the moored boat. Morley must have gone ashore for a moonlight visit to the ruined temple; and Thorway frowned heavily at this new presumptive evidence of his employer's eccentricity and aberration. An unwonted sense of responsibility, deep and solemn, stirred within him. He seemed to hear an inward injunction, a strange half-familiar voice, bidding him to take care of Morley. This unhealthy and exorbitant interest in a more than problematic past should be discouraged or at least supervised.

Very quickly, he made up his mind as to what he should do. Going below, he called two of the Swedish sailors from their game of pedro and had them row him ashore in the ship's dinghy. As they neared the beach the boat used by Morley was plainly visible in the plumy shadow of a clump of seaward-leaning palms.

Thorway, without offering any explanation of his purpose in going ashore, told the sailors to return to the ship. Then, following the well-worn trail toward the temple, he mounted the island-slope.

Step by step, as he went on, he became aware of a strange difference in the vegetation. What were these montsrous ferns and primordial-looking flowers about him? Surely it was some weird trick of the moonlight, distorting the familiar palms and shrubs. He had seen nothing of the sort in his daytime visits, and such forms were impossible, anyway. Then, by degrees, he was beset with terrible doubt and bewilderment. There came to him the ineffably horrifying sensation of passing beyond his proper self, beyond all that he knew as legitimate and verifiable. Fantastic, unspeakable thoughts, alien, abnormal impulses, thronged upon him from the sorcerous glare of the effulgent moon. He shuddered at repellent but insistent memories that were not his own, at the ghastly compulsion fo an unbelievable command. What on earth was possessing him? Was he going mad like Morley? The moon-bright isle was like some bottomless abyss of nightmare fantasy, into which he sank with nightmare terror.

He sought to recover his hard, materialistic sanity, his belief in the safe literality of things. Then, suddenly and without surprise, he was no longer Thorway.

He knew the real purpose for which he had come ashore—the solemn rite in which he was to play an awful but necessary part. The ordained hour was near—the worshippers, the sacrifice and the six fellow-priests awaited his coming in the immemorial fane of Rhalu.

Unassisted by any of the priests, Matla had stretched himself on the cold altar. How long he lay there, waiting, he could not tell. But at last, by the rustling stir and murmur of the throng, he knew that the seventh priest had arrived.

All fear had left him, as if he were already beyond the pain and suffering of earth. But he knew with a precision well-nigh real as physical sight and sensation the use which would be made of the copperish knife and the silver goblet.

He lay gazing at the wan heavens, and saw dimly, with far-focused eyes, the leaning face of the seventh priest. The face was doubly familiar . . . but he had forgotten something. He did not try to remember. Already it seemed to him that the white moon was drawing nearer, was stooping from her celestial station to quaff the awaited sacrifice. Her light blinded him with unearthly fulgor; but he saw dimly the flash of the falling knife ere it entered his heart. There was an instant of tearing pain that plunged on and on through his body, as if its tissues were a deep abyss. Then a sudden darkness took the heavens and blotted out the face of Rhalu; and all things, even pain, were erased for Matla by the black mist of an eternal nothing.

In the morning, Svensen and his sailors waited very patiently for the return of Morley and Thorway from the island. When afternoon came and the two were still absent, Svensen decided that it was time to investigate.

He had received orders to lift anchor for San Francisco that day; but he could not very well depart without Thorway and Morley.

With one of the crew, he rowed ashore and climbed the hill to the ruins. The roofless temple was empty, save for the plants that taken root in the crevices of its pavement. Svensen and the sailor, looking about for the archaeologists, were horrified from their stolidity by the stains of newly dried blood that lined the great groove in the altar-block to its edge.

They summoned the remainder of the crew. A daylong search of the little island, however, was without result. The natives knew nothing of the whereabouts of Morley and Thorway, and were queerly reticent even in avowing their ignorance. There was no place where the two men could have hidden themselves, granting that they had any reason for a procedure so peculiar. Svensen and his men gave it up. If they had been imaginative, it might have seemed to them that the archaeologists had vanished bodily into the past.

MONSTERS IN THE NIGHT

THE change occurred before he could divest himself of more than his coat and scarf. He had only to step out of the shoes, to shed the socks with two backward kicks, and shuffle off the trousers from his lean hind-legs and belly. But he was still deep-chested after the change, and his shirt was harder to loosen. His hackles rose with rage as he slewed his head around and tore it away with hasty fangs in a flurry of falling buttons and rags. Tossing off the last irksome ribbons, he regretted his haste. Always heretofore he had been careful in regard to small details. The shirt was monogrammed. He must remember to collect all the tatters later. He could stuff them in his pockets, and wear the coat buttoned closely on his way home, when he had changed back.

Hunger snarled within him, mounting from belly to throat, from throat to mouth. It seemed that he had not eaten for a month—for a month of months. Raw butcher's meat was never fresh enough: it had known the coldness of death and refrigeration, and had lost all vital essence. Long ago there had been other meals, warm, and sauced with still-spurting blood. But now the thin memory merely served to exasperate his ravening.

Chaos raced within his brain. Inconsequently, for an instant, he recalled the first warning of his malady, preceding even the distaste for cooked meat: the aversion, the allergy, to silver forks and spoons. It

had soon extended to other objects of the same metal. He had cringed even from the touch of coinage, had been forced to use paper and to refuse change. Steel, too, was a substance unfriendly to beings like him; and the time came when he could abide it little more than silver.

What made him think of such matters now, setting his teeth on edge with repugnance, choking him with something worse than nausea?

The hunger returned, demanding swift appeasement. With clumsy pads he pushed his discarded raiment under the shrubbery, hiding it from the heavy-jowled moon. It was the moon that drew the tides of madness in his blood, and compelled the metamorphosis. But it must not betray to any chance passerby the garments he would need later, when he returned to human semblance after the night's hunting.

The night was warm and windless, and the woodland seemed to hold its breath. There were, he knew, other monsters abroad in that year of the Twenty-first Century. The vampire still survived, subtler and deadlier, protected by man's incredulity. And he himself was not the only lycanthrope: his brothers and sisters ranged unchallenged, preferring the darker urban jungles, while he, being country-bred, still kept the ancient ways. Moreover, there were monsters unknown as yet to myth and superstition. But these too were mostly haunters of cities. He had no wish to meet any of them. And of such meeting, surely, there was small likelihood.

He followed a crooked lane, reconnoitered previously. It was too narrow for cars and it soon became a mere path. At the path's forking he ensconced himself in the shadow of a broad, mistletoe-blotted oak. The path was used by certain late pedestrians who lived even farther out from town. One of them might come along at any moment.

Whimpering a little, with the hunger of a starved hound, he waited. He was a monster that nature had made, ready to obey nature's first commandment: *Thou shalt kill and eat.* He was a thing of terror . . . a fable whispered around prehistoric cavern-fires . . . a miscegenation allied by later myth to the powers of hell and sorcery. But in no sense was he akin to those monsters beyond nature, the spawn of a new and blacker magic, who killed without hunger and without malevolence.

He had only minutes to wait, before his tensing ears caught the far-off vibration of footsteps. The steps came rapidly nearer, seeming to tell him much as they came. They were firm and resilient, tireless and

rhythmic, telling of youth or of full maturity untouched by age. They told, surely, of a worthwhile prey; or prime lean meat and vital, abundant blood.

There was a slight froth on the lips of the one who waited. He had ceased to whimper. He crouched closer to the ground for the anticipated leap.

The path ahead was heavily shadowed. Dimly, moving fast, the walker appeared in the shadows. He seemed to be all that the watcher had surmised from the sound of his footsteps. He was tall and well-shouldered, swinging with a lithe sureness, a precision of powerful tendon and muscle. His head was a faceless blur in the gloom. He was hatless, clad in dark coat and trousers such as anyone might wear. His steps rang with the assurance of one who has nothing to fear, and has never dreamt of the crouching creatures of darkness.

Now he was almost abreast of the watcher's covert. The watcher could wait no longer but sprang from his ambush of shadow, towering high upon the stranger as his hind-paws left the ground. His rush was irresistible, as always. The stranger toppled backward, sprawling and helpless, as others had done, and the assailant bent to the bare throat that gleamed more enticingly than that of a siren.

It was a strategy that had never failed . . . until now. . . .

The shock, the consternation, had hurled him away from that prostrate figure and had forced him back upon teetering haunches. It was the shock, perhaps, that caused him to change again, swiftly, resuming human shape before his hour. As the change began, he spat out several broken lupine fangs; and then he was spitting human teeth.

The stranger rose to his feet, seemingly unshaken and undismayed. He came forward in a rift of revealing moonlight, stooping to a half-crouch, and flexing his beryllium-steel fingers enameled with flesh-pink.

"Who—what—are you?" quavered the werewolf.

The stranger did not bother to answer as he advanced, every synapse of the computing brain transmitting the conditioned message, translated into simplest binary terms, "Dangerous. Not human. *Kill!*"

THE MALAY KRISE

"SAHIB," said the sword-dealer, "this blade, which came from far Singapore, has not its equal for sharpness in all Delhi."

He handed me the blade for inspection. It was a long krise, or Malay knife, with a curious boat-shaped hilt, and, as he had said, was very keen.

"I bought it of Sidi Hassen, a Singapore dealer into whose possession it came at the sale of Sultan Sujah Ali's weapons and effects after the Sultan's capture by the British. Hast heard the tale, Sahib? No? It runs thus:

"Sujah Ali was the younger son of a great Sultan. There being little chance of his ever coming to the throne, he left his father's dominions, and becoming a pirate, set out to carve for himself a name and an empire. Though having at first but a few *prahus* (boats) and less than a hundred men, he made up this lack by his qualities of leadership, which brought him many victories, much plunder and considerable renown. His fame caused many men to join him, and his booty enabled him to build more *prahus*. Adding continually to his fleets, he soon swept the rivers of the Peninsula, and then began to venture upon the sea. In a few years his ships were held in fear and respect by every Dutch merchantman or Chinese junk whose sails loomed above the waters of the China Sea. Inland he began to overrun the dominions of the other Sultans, conquering, amongst others, that of his older brother, who had succeeded to his father's throne. Sujah Ali's fame reached far, and its shadow lay upon many peoples.

"Then the English came to the Peninsula and built Singapore. Sujah Ali despatched ships to prey upon their vessels, many of whom he succeeded in capturing. The English sent big ships after him, bearing many heavy guns and many armed men.

"The Sultan went to meet them in person, with the greater part of his fleet. It was a disastrous day for him. When the red sun sank into the sea, fully fifty of his best *prahus,* and thousands of his men, amongst whom he mourned several of his most noted captains, lay beneath the waters. He fled inland with the shattered remnant of his fleet.

"The British resolved to crush him decisively, sent boats up the rivers, and in numerous hard-fought battles they sunk most of Sujah Ali's remaining *prahus,* and cleared land and water of the infesting pirates. The Sultan himself, however, they sought in vain. He had fled to a well-nigh inaccessible hiding-place—a small village deep in a network of creeks, swamps, and jungle-covered islands. Here he remained with a few fighting-men while the English hunted unsuccessfully for the narrow, winding entrances.

"Amina, his favorite wife, was among those who had accompanied him to this refuge. She was passionately attached to the Sultan, and, although such was his wish, had positively refused to be left behind.

"There was a beautiful girl in the village, with whom Sujah Ali became infatuated. He finally married her, and she exercised so great an influence over him that Amina, who had hitherto considered herself first in her husband's estimation, grew jealous. As time passed, and she perceived more clearly how complete was his infatuation, her jealousy grew more intense and violent, and at last prompted her to leave the village secretly one night, and to go to the captain of a British vessel which had been cruising up and down the river for weeks. To this man, one Rankling Sahib, she revealed the secret of Sujah Ali's hiding place. In thus betraying him, her desire was probably more for revenge upon her rival than upon the Sultan.

"Rankling Sahib, guided by Amina, passed at midnight through the network of creeks and jungles. He landed his crew and entered the village. The Malays, taken completely by surprise, offered little or no resistance. Many awoke only to find themselves confronted by loaded rifles, and surrendered without opposition.

"Sujah Ali, who had lain awake all evening wondering as to the cause of Amina's absence, rushed out of his hut with half a score of his

men, and made a futile attempt at escape. A desperate fight ensued, in which he used his krise, the same that thou seest, with deadly effect. Two of the English he stretched dead, and a third he wounded severely.

"Rankling Sahib had given orders that the Sultan be taken alive, if possible. Finally, wounded, weary and surrounded by his foes on all sides, the Sultan was made prisoner. And the next morning he was taken down the river to Singapore.

"This is the krise you see on the wall."

THE GHOST OF MOHAMMED DIN

"I'LL wager a hundred rupees that you won't stay there over-night," said Nicholson.

It was late in the afternoon, and we were seated on the veranda of my friend's bungalow in the Begum suburb at Hyderabad. Our conversation had turned to ghosts, on which subject I was, at the time, rather skeptical, and Nicholson, after relating a number of blood-curdling stories, had finished by remarking that a nearby house, which was said to be haunted, would give me an excellent chance to put the matter to the test.

"Done!" I answered, laughing.

"It's no joking matter," said my friend, seriously. "However, if you really wish to encounter the ghost, I can easily secure you the necessary permission. The house, a six-roomed bungalow, owned by one Yussuf Ali Borah, is tenanted only by the spirit who appears to regard it as his exclusive property.

"Two years ago it was occupied by a Moslem merchant named Mohammed Din, and his family and servants. One morning they found the merchant dead—stabbed through the heart, and no trace of his murderer, whose identity still remains unrevealed.

"Mohammed Din's people left, and the place was let to a Parsee up from Bombay on business. He vacated the premises abruptly about mid-

night, and told a wild tale the next morning of having encountered a number of disembodied spirits, describing the chief one as Mohammed Din.

"Several other people took the place in turn, but their occupancy was generally of short duration. All told tales similar to the Parsee's. Gradually it acquired a bad reputation, and the finding of tenants became impossible."

"Have you ever seen the ghost yourself?" I asked.

"Yes; I spent a night, or rather part of one, there, for I went out of the window about one o'clock. My nerves were not strong enough to stand it any longer. I wouldn't enter the place again for almost any sum of money."

Nicholson's story only confirmed my intention of occupying the haunted house. Armed with a firm disbelief in the supernatural, and a still firmer intention to prove it all rot, I felt myself equal to all the ghosts, native and otherwise, in India. Of my ability to solve the mystery, if there were any, I was quite assured.

"My friend," said Nicholson to Yussuf Ali Borah an hour later, "wishes to spend a night in your haunted bungalow."

The person addressed, a fat little Moslem gentleman, looked at me curiously.

"The house is at your service, Sahib," he said, "I presume that Nicholson Sahib has told you the experiences of the previous tenants?"

I replied that he had. "If the whole thing is not a trumped-up story, there is doubtless some trickery afoot," said I, "and I warn you that the trickster will not come off unharmed. I have a loaded revolver, and shall not hesitate to use it if I meet any disembodied spirits."

Yussuf's only answer was to shrug his shoulders.

He gave us the keys, and we set out for the bungalow, which was only a few minutes' walk distant. Night had fallen when we reached it. Nicholson unlocked the door and we entered, and lighting a lamp I had brought with me, set out on a tour of inspection. The furniture consisted chiefly of two charpoys, three tabourets, an old divan quite innocent of cushions, a broken punkah, a three-legged chair and a dilapidated rug. Everything was covered with dust; the shutters rattled disconsolately, and all the doors creaked. The other rooms were meagrely furnished. I could hear rats running about in the dark.

There was a compound adjoining, filled with rank reed and a solitary

pipal tree. Nicholson said that the ghost generally appeared in one of the rooms opening upon it, and this I selected as the one in which to spend the night. It was a fitting place for ghosts to haunt. The ceiling sagged listlessly, and the one charpoy which it contained had a wobbly look.

"Sleep well," said Nicholson. "You will find the atmosphere of this spirit-ridden place most conducive to slumber."

"Rats!" said I.

"Yes, there are plenty of rats here," he answered as he went out.

Placing the lamp on a tabouret, I lay down, with some misgivings as to its stability, on the charpoy. Happily, these proved unfounded, and laying my revolver close at hand, I took out a newspaper and began to read.

Several hours passed and nothing unusual happened. The ghost failed to materialize, and about eleven, with my fine skepticism greatly strengthened, and feeling a trifle ashamed concerning the hundred rupees which my friend would have to hand over the next morning, I lay down and tried to go to sleep. I had no doubt that my threat about the revolver to Yussuf Ali Borah had checked any plans for scaring me that might have been entertained.

Scarcely were my eyes closed when all the doors and windows, which had been creaking and rattling all evening, took on renewed activity. A light breeze had sprung up, and one shutter, which hung only by a single hinge, began to drum a tune on the wall. The rats scuttled about with redoubled energy, and a particularly industrious fellow gnawed something in the further corner for about an hour. It was manifestly impossible to sleep. I seemed to hear whisperings in the air, and once thought that I detected faint footsteps going and coming through the empty rooms. A vague feeling of eeriness crept upon me, and it required a very strong mental effort to convince myself that these sounds were entirely due to imagination.

Finally the breeze died down, the loose shutter ceased to bang, the rat stopped gnawing, and comparative quiet being restored, I fell asleep. Two hours later I woke, and taking out my watch, saw, though the lamp had begun to burn dimly, that the hands pointed to two o'clock. I was about to turn over, when again I heard the mysterious footsteps, this time quite audibly. They seemed to approach my room, but when I judged them to be in the next apartment, ceased abruptly. I waited five

minutes in a dead silence, with my nerves on edge and my scalp tingling.

Then I became aware that there was something between me and the opposite wall. At first it was a dim shadow, but as I watched, it darkened into a body. A sort of phosphorescent light emanated from it, surrounding it with pale radiance.

The lamp flared up and went out, but the figure was still visible. It was that of a tall native dressed in flowing white robes and a blue turban. He wore a bushy beard and had eyes like burning coals of fire. His gaze was directed intently upon me, and I felt cold shivers running up and down my spine. I wanted to shriek, but my tongue seemed glued to the roof of my mouth. The figure stepped forward and I noticed that the robe was red at the breast as though with blood.

This, then, was the ghost of Mohammed Din. Nicholson's story was true, and for a moment my conviction that the supernatural was all nonsense went completely to pieces. Only momentarily, however, for I remembered that I had a revolver, and the thought gave me courage. Perhaps it was a trick after all, and anger arose in me, and a resolve not to let the trickster escape unscathed.

I raised the weapon with a quick movement and fired. The figure being not over five paces distant, it was impossible to miss, but when the smoke had cleared it had not changed its position.

It began to advance, making no sound, and in a few moments was beside the charpoy. With on remaining vestige of courage I raised my revolver and pulled the trigger three times in succession, but without visible effect. I hurled the weapon at the figure's head, and heard it crash against the opposite wall an instant later. The apparition, though visible, was without tangibility.

Now it began to disappear. Very slowly at first it faded, then more rapidly until I could make out only the bare outlines. Another instant and all was gone but the outline of one hand, which hung motionless in the air. I got up and made a step towards it, then stopped abruptly, for the outlines again began to fill in, the hand to darken and solidify. Now I noticed something I had not before seen—a heavy gold ring set with some green gem, probably an emerald, appeared to be on the middle finger.

The hand began to move slowly past me towards the door opening into the next apartment. Lighting the lamp, I followed, all fear being

thrown aside and desiring to find the explanation of the phenomenon. I could hear faint footfalls beneath the hand, as though the owner, though invisible, were still present. I followed it through the adjoining apartment and into the next, where it again stopped and hung motionless. One finger was pointed toward the further corner, where stood a tabouret, or stand.

Impelled, I think, by some force other than my own volition, I went over and lifting the tabouret, found a small wooden box, covered with dust, beneath.

Turning about I saw that the hand had disappeared.

Taking the box with me, I returned to my room. The thing was made of very hard wood and in size was perhaps ten inches in length by eight in width and four in height. It was light, and the contents rustled when I shook it. I guessed them to be letters or papers, but having nothing to pry the box open with, I concluded to wait until morning before trying to.

Strange as it may seem I soon fell asleep. You would naturally think that a man would not feel inclined to slumber immediately after encountering a disembodied spirit. I can give no explanation of it.

The sun was streaming through the window when I awoke, and so cheerful and matter-of-fact was the broad daylight that I wondered if the events of the night were not all a dream. The presence of the box, however, convinced me that they were not.

Nicholson came in and appeared much surprised and a trifle discomfited to find me still in possession.

"Well," he inquired, "what happened? What did you see?"

I told him what had occurred and produced the box as proof.

An hour afterwards, Nicholson, with a short native sword and considerable profanity, was trying to pry the thing open. He finally succeeded. Within were a number of closely-written sheets of paper and some letters, most of which were addressed to Mohammed Din.

The papers were mostly in the form of memoranda and business accounts such as would be made by a merchant. They were written in execrable Urdu, hopelessly jumbled together, and though all were dated, it was no small task to sort them out. The letters were mostly regarding business affairs, but several, which were written in a very fair hand, were from a cousin of Mohammed Din's, one Ali Bagh, an Agra horse-trader. These, two, with one exception, were commonplace

enough. Nicholson knitted his brows as he read it, and then handed it to me. The greater part, being of little interest, has escaped my memory, but I recollect that the last paragraph ran thus:

"I do not understand how you came by the knowledge, nor why you wish to use it to ruin me. It is all true. If you have any love for me, forbear."

"What does that mean?" asked Nicholson. "What secret did Mohammed Din possess that he could have used to ruin his cousin?"

We went through the memoranda carefully, and near the bottom found the following, dated April 21, 1881, according to our notation:

"To-day I found the letters which I have long been seeking. They are ample proof of what I have long known, but have hitherto been unable to substantiate, that Ali Bagh is a counterfeiter, the chief of a large band. I have but to turn them over to the police, and he will be dragged away to jail, there to serve a term of many years. It will be good revenge —part compensation, at least, for the injuries he has done me."

"That explains Ali Bagh's letter," said Nicholson. "Mohammed Din was boastful enough to write to him, telling him that he knew of his guilt and intended to prove it."

Next were several sheets in a different hand and signed "Mallek Khan." Mallek Khan, it seemed, was a friend of Ali Bagh's, and the sheets were in the form of a letter. But being without fold, it was quite evident they they had not been posted.

The communication related to certain counterfeiting schemes, and the names of a number of men implicated appeared. This, plainly, was the proof alluded to by Mohammed Din, and which he had threatened his cousin to turn over to the police.

There was nothing else of interest save the following in Mohammed Din's hand, dated April 17th, 1881:

"To-morrow I shall give the papers to the authorities. I have delayed too long, and was very foolish to write to Ali Bagh.

"I passed a man in the street today who bore a resemblance to my cousin. . . . I could not be sure . . . But if he is here, then may Allah help me, for he will hesitate at nothing. . . ."

What followed was illegible.

"On the night of April 21st," said Nicholson, "Mohammed Din was killed by a person or persons unknown." He paused and then went on: "This Ali Bagh is a man with whom I have had some dealings in

horsês, and an especially vicious crook it was that he got three hundred rupees out of me for. He has a bad reputation as a horse-dealer, and the Agra police have long been patiently seeking evidence of his implication in several bold counterfeiting schemes. Mallek Khan, one of his accomplices, was arrested, tried and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment, but refused to turn State's evidence on Ali Bagh. The police are convinced that Ali Bagh was as much, if not more implicated, than Mallek Khan, but they can do nothing for lack of proof. The turning over of these papers, however, as poor Mohammed Din would have done had he lived, will lead to his arrest and conviction.

"It was Ali Bagh who killed Mohammed Din, I am morally convinced, his motive, of course, being to prevent the disclosure of his guilt. Your extraordinary experience last night and the murdered man's papers point to it. Yet we can prove nothing, and your tale would be laughed at in court."

Some blank sheets remained in the bottom of the box, and my friend tilted them out as he spoke. They fluttered to the veranda and something rolled out from amongst them and lay glittering in the sunshine. It was a heavy gold ring set with an emerald—the very same that I had seen upon the apparition's finger several hours before.

A week or so later, as the result of the papers that Nicholson sent to the Agra police, accompanied by an explanatory note, one Ali Bagh, horse-trader, found himself on trial, charged with counterfeiting. It was a very short trial, his character and reputation going badly against him, and it being proven that was the leader of the gang of which Mallek Khan thought to be a member, he was sentenced to a somewhat longer term in jail than his accomplice.

THE MAHOUT

ARTHUR MERTON, British resident at Jizapur, and his cousin, John Hawley, an Agra newspaper editor, who had run down into Central India for a few weeks' shooting at Merton's invitation, reined in their horses just outside the gates of Jizapur. The Maharajah's elephants, a score of the largest and finest "tuskers" in Central India, were being ridden out for their daily exercise. The procession was led by Rajah, the great elephant of State, who towered above the rest like a warship amongst merchantmen. He was a magnificent elephant, over twelve feet from his shoulders to the ground, and of a slightly lighter hue than the others, who were of the usual muddy gray. On the ends of his tusks gleamed golden knobs.

"What a kingly animal!" exclaimed Hawley, as Rajah passed.

As he spoke, the mahout, or driver, who had been sitting his charge like a bronze image, turned and met Hawley's eyes. He was a man to attract attention, this mahout, as distinctive a figure among his brother mahouts as was Rajah among the elephants. He was apparently very tall, and of a high-caste type, the eyes proud and fearless, the heavy beard carefully trimmed, and the face cast in a handsome, dignified mold.

Hawley gave a second exclamation as he met the mahout's gaze and stared at the man hard. The Hindu, after an impressive glance, turned his head, and the elephant went on.

"I could swear that I have seen that man before," said Hawley, at his cousin's interrogatory expression. "It was near Agra, about six years

ago, when I was out riding one afternoon. My horse, a nervous, high-strung Waler, bolted at the sight of an umbrella which someone had left by the roadside. It was impossible to stop him, indeed, I had all I could to keep on. Suddenly, the Hindu we have just passed, or his double, stepped out into the road and grabbed the bridle. He was carried quite a distance, but managed to keep his grip, and the Waler finally condescended to stop. After receiving my thanks with a dignified depreciation of the service he had done me, the Hindu disappeared, and I have not seen him since.

"It is scarcely probable, though, that this mahout is the same," Hawley resumed, after a pause. "My rescuer was dressed as a high-caste, and it is not conceivable that such a one would turn elephant driver."

"I know nothing of the man," said Merton, as they rode on into the city. "He has been Rajah's mahout ever since I came here a year ago. Of course, as you say, he cannot be the man who stopped your horse. It is merely a chance resemblance."

The next afternoon, Hawley was out riding alone. He had left the main road for a smaller one running into the jungle, intending to visit a ruined temple of which Merton had told him. Suddnely he noticed elephant tracks in the dust, exceedingly large ones, which he concluded could have been made only by Rajah. A momentary curiosity as to why the elephant had been ridden off into the jungle, and also concerning the mahout, led Hawley to follow the tracks when the road branched and they took the path opposite to the one that he had intended to follow. In a few minutes he came to a spot of open ground in the thick luxuriant jungle, and reined in quickly at what he saw there.

Rajah stood in the clearing, holding something in his trunk which Hawley at first glance took to be a man, dressed in a blue and gold native attire, and with a red turban. Another look told him that it was merely a dummy—some old clothes stuffed with straw. As he watched, the mahout gave a low command, reënforced with a jab behind the ear from his ankus, or goad. Rajah gave an upward swing with his trunk, and released his hold on the figure, which flew skyward for at least twenty feet, and then dropped limply to earth. The mahout watched its fall with an expression of what seemed to be malevolence upon his face, though Hawley might have been mistaken as to this at the distance. He gave another command, and a jab at the elephant's cheek—a peculiar, quick thrust, at which Rajah picked the dummy up and placed it on his

back behind the mahout in the place usually occupied by the howdah. The Hindu directing, the figure was again seized and hurled into the air.

Much mystified, Hawley watched several repetitions of this strange performance, but was unable to puzzle out what it meant. Finally, the mahout caught sight of him, and rode the elephant hastily away into the jungle on the opposite side of the clearing. Evidently he did not wish to be observed or questioned. Hawley continued his journey to the temple, thinking over the curious incident as he went. He did not see the mahout again that day.

He spoke of what he had seen to Merton that evening, but his cousin paid little attention to the tale, saying that no one could comprehend anything done by natives, and that it wasn't worth while to wonder at their actions anyway. Even if one could find the explanation, it wouldn't be worth knowing.

The scene in the jungle recurred to Hawley many times, probably because of the resemblance of the mahout to the man who had stopped his horse at Agra. But he could think of no plausible explanation of what he had seen. At last he dismissed the matter from his mind altogether.

At the time of Hawley's visit, great preparations were being made for the marriage of the Maharajah of Jizapur, Krishna Singh, to the daughter of the neighboring sovereign. There was to be much feasting, firing of guns, and a gorgeous procession. All the Rajahs, Ranas, and Thakurs, etc., for a radius of at least hundred miles, were to be present. The spectacle, indeed, was one of the inducements that had drawn Hawley down into Central India.

After two weeks of unprecedented activity and excitement in the city of Jizapur, the great day came, with incessant thunder of guns from the Maharajah's palace during all the forenoon, as the royalty of Central Indian arrived with its hordes of picturesque, tattered, dirty retainers and soldiery. Each king or dignitary was punctiliously saluted according to his rank, which in India is determined by the number of guns that may be fired in his honor.

At noon a great procession, the Maharajah heading it, issued from the palace to ride out and meet the bride and her father and attendants, who were to reach Jizapur at that hour.

Hawley and Merton watched the pageant from the large and many-colored crowd that lined the roadside without the city gates. As Rajah,

the great State elephant emerged, with Krishna Singh in the gold-embroidered howdah, or canopied seat, on his back, a rising cloud of dust in the distance proclaimed the coming of the bride and her relatives.

Behind the Maharajah came a number of elephants, bearing the nobles and dignitaries of Jizapur, and the neighboring princes. Then emerged richly caparisoned horses, with prismatically-attired riders—soldiers and attendants. Over this great glare of color and movement was the almost intolerable light of the midday Eastern sun.

The two Englishmen were some distance from the city gates, so that when the Maharajah's slow, majestic procession passed them, that of the bridge was drawing near—a similar one, and less gorgeous only because it was smaller.

Perhaps fifty yards separated the two when something happened to bring both processesions to a halt. Hawley, who happened at the moment to be idly watching the elephant Rajah, and his driver, saw the mahout reach swiftly forward and stab the animal's cheek with his goad, precisely as he had done on that day in the jungle when Hawley had come unexpectedly upon him. Probably no one else noticed the action, or, if they did, attached any importance to it in the excitement that followed.

As he reached with his trunk for the dummy seated on his back, so Rajah reached into the howdah and grasped Krishna Singh about the waist. In an instant the astonished, terror-stricken Maharajah was dangling in mid-air where the elephant held him poised a moment. Then, in spite of the shouts, commands, and blows of his mahout, Rajah began to swing Krishna Singh to and fro, slowly at first, but with a gradually increasing speed. It was like watching a gigantic pendulum. The fascinated crowd gazed in a sudden and tense silence for what seemed to them hours, though they were really only seconds, before the elephant, with a last vicious upward impetus of his helpless victim, released his hold.

Krishna Singh soared skyward, a blot of gold and red against the intense, stark, blazing azure of the Indian sky. To the horror-stricken onlookers he seemed to hang there for hours, before he began to fall back from the height to which the giant elephant had tossed him as one would toss a tennis-ball. Hawley turned away, unable to look any longer, and in an instant heard the hollow, lifeless thud as the body struck the ground.

The sound broke the spell of horror and amazement that had held the crowd, and a confused babble arose, interspersed with a few wails and cries. One sharp shriek came from the curtained howdah of the bride. The Maharajah's body guard at once galloped forward and formed a ring about the body. The crowd, to whom the elephant had gone "musth," or mad, began to retreat and disperse.

Hawley, in a few words, told his cousin of what he has seen the mahout do, and his belief that the elephant's action had thus been incited.

The two Englishmen went to the captain of the body-guard, who was standing by the side of the fallen Maharajah. Krishna Singh lay quite dead, his neck broken by the fall. The captain, upon being informed of what Hawley had seen, directed some of his men to go in search of the mahout, who, in the confusion, had slipped from Rajah's neck, disappearing no one knew where. Their search was unsuccessful, nor did a further one, continued for over a week, reveal any trace of the elephant-driver.

But several days afterward Hawley received a letter, bearing the Agra postmark. It was in a hand unfamiliar to him and was written in rather stiff, though perfectly correct English, such as an educated native would write. It was as follows:

To Hawley Sahib:

I am the man who stopped the Sahib's horse near Agra one day, six years ago. Because I have seen in the Sahib's eyes that he recognized and remembers me, I am writing this. He will then understand much that has puzzled him.

My father was Krishna Singh's half-brother. Men who bore my father an enmity, invented evidence of a plot on his part to murder Krishna Singh and seize the throne. The Maharajah, bearing him little love and being of an intensely suspicious nature, required little proof to believe this, and caused my father and several others of the family to be seized and thrown into the palace dungeons. A few days later, without trial, they were led out and executed by the "Death of the Elephant." Perchance the Sahib has not heard of this. The manner of it is thus: The condemned man is made to kneel with his head on a block of stone, and an elephant, at a command from the driver, places one of his feet on the prisoner's head, killing him, of course, instantly.

I, who was but a youth at the time, by some inadvertence was allowed to escape, and made my way to Agra, where I remained several years

with distant relatives, learning, in that time, to speak and write English. I was intending to enter the service of the British Raj, when an idea of revenge on Krishna Singh, for my father's death, suddenly sprang into full conception. I had long plotted, forming many impracticable and futile plans for vengeance, but the one that then occurred to me seemed possible, though extremely difficult. As the Sahib has seen, it proved successful.

I at once left Agra, disguising myself as a low-caste, and went to Burma, where I learned elephant-driving—a work not easy for one who has not been trained to it from boyhood. In doing this, I sacrificed my caste. In my thirst for revenge, however, it seemed but a little thing.

After four years in the jungle I came to Jizapur and, being a skilled and fully accredited mahout, was given a position in the Maharajah's stables. Krishna Singh never suspected my identity, for I had changed greatly in the ten years since I had fled from Jizapur, and who would have thought to find Kshatriya in the position of such a low-caste elephant-driver?

Gradually, for my skill and trustworthiness, I was advanced in position, and at last was entrusted with the State elephant, Rajah. This was what I had long been aiming at, for on my attaining the care of Krishna Singh's own elephant depended the success or failure of my plan.

This position obtained, my purpose was but half-achieved. It was necessary that the elephant be trained for his part, and this, indeed, was perhaps the most difficult and dangerous part of my work. It was not easy to avoid observation, and detection was likely to prove fatal to me and to my plan. On that day when the Sahib came upon me in the jungle, I thought my scheme doomed, and prepared to flee. But evidently no idea of the meaning of the performance in the jungle entered the Sahib's mind.

At last came my day of revenge, and after the Maharajah's death I succeeded in miraculously escaping, though I had fully expected to pay for my vengeance with my own life. I am safe now—not all the police and secret emissaries in India can find me.

The death that my father met has been visited upon his murderer, and the shadow of those dreadful days and of that unavenged crime has at last been lifted from my heart. I go forth content, to face life and fate calmly, and with a mind free and untroubled.

THE RAJA AND THE TIGER

THERE was more than one reason why Bently did not view his appointment as British Resident at Shaitanabad with enthusiasm. The climate was reported to be particularly hot even for India, the population largely composed of snakes, tigers, and wild boars, and the attitude of the natives from the Rajah down unfriendly. The last Resident had died of sunstroke, so it was said, and the one before him departed suddenly for an unknown destination without taking the trouble to apply for leave of absence. But as somebody had to occupy the position, Bently went to Shaitanabad; from the nearest railway station one hundred miles by camel and bullock cart over parched hills and sandy desert.

His early impressions of the place were hardly reassuring. His first glimpse of it was from the summit of a cactus-covered hill through a red haze of dust-laden heat. The principal feature which caught his eye was the Raja's fortress-palace perched on a high rock on the northeast side and grimly overlooking the flat-roofed city. It was known as the Nahargarh, or Tiger Fort. For the rest Shaitanabad may be summed up as a place of narrow, irregular alleys, bazaars with shops little larger than dry-goods boxes, bad smells, a perpetual plague of insects, gaily clothed people, and a general Arabian Nights atmosphere. A thousand years ago it was the same, and so it will be a thousand years hence. The local temperature was 120° in the shade, sometimes more. Except the Resident, there were no other Englishmen in the place, not even a missionary. That is sufficient testimony as to Shaitanabad's character.

Bently regarded it as fortunate that the Residency was situated outside the city, and that his predecessor's staff of Bengali and Rajput servants were waiting to receive him. A bath, a fairly well-cooked meal, and a good night's rest, in spite of the heat, removed the exhaustion of the journey and made the outlook appear more satisfactory.

His first duty being to call on the Raja, he early proceeded to the palace accompanied by his servant, Lal Das. Ascending a flight of steps cut in the towering sandstone rock, which was the only means of access to the fort, Bently passed through a great gate into a courtyard. There he was left to stand in the full rays of the Indian sun while the Raja's attendants went in to announce the Resident's arrival. Finlly they returned and conducted him through a deep veranda into a hall, from which another room opened. This room, carpeted with Persian rugs and hung with rare kinkhab draperies, seemed cool and pleasant after the heat without.

The Raja, Chumbu Singh, was seated on a cushioned *gadi,* surrounded by several attendants. He was a tall, slender man of about forty, and wore the peculiar Rajput side whiskers. His attire consisted of a pearl-embroidered coat, trousers of white tussah silk, and an elaborately embroidered turban. One hand toyed with the gem-encrusted hilt of a short sword stuck in a broad silk cummerbund.

At this first meeting conversation was short and formal. The Raja asked after Bently's health, and requested his opinion of such matters as the climate. He spoke fluent English, and seemed well educated and intelligent.

"I hope you will like Shaitanabad," he said, finally. "Sport here is good. If at any time you care to hunt tigers, I shall be glad to place all the facilities in my power at your disposal."

Bently retired on the whole rather favorably impressed with the Raja, and inclined to treat certain adverse reports of his conduct as exaggerated. Native princes are always more or less prone to irritation at the ways of British Residents. Probably such was the basis of Chumbu Singh's offense in British official quarters.

During the next two or three weeks Bently thought he had reason to be pleased at his judgment of native character. Chumbu Singh fell so readily into certain administrative reforms proposed by Bently that there appeared little doubt of his earnestness to walk in the path of modern progress. So far things looked much better than he had been led to an-

ticipate, even the temperature dropping to 98° at midnight. It was after the settlement of a land ownership case, in which Bently's assistance had been requested, that the Raja made a proposal.

"I have arranged for a tiger hunt tonight," he said. "Would you like to go?"

Bently eagerly responded in the affirmative.

"This is a terrible animal, Sahib," continued the Raja. "He has killed many people. His den is in the hills—an old cave temple, haunted, my people, say, by ghosts and devils. However that may be, the tiger is many devils in himself. He stalks both cattle and villagers in broad daylight, and kills not only when hungry, but out of the devilishness of his heart. We have planned to get him at the cave."

When the last rays of the sun had faded from the hot red sandstone of the Nahargarh, and the gray veil of dusk had fallen over Shaitanabad, Chumbu Singh and several followers came to the Residency to announce that all was ready. They were armed and mounted on wiry Baluchi ponies. Bently joined them, accompanied by Lal Das, and the party set off across the rapidly darkening plain. Their destination, as indicated by Chumbu Singh, was a mass of low-lying, jungle-clad hills two miles to the northeast. The plain, or rather desert, between was barren with scarce a tree or shrub, and its monotony was broken only by a series of nasty mullahs or gulleys, which gave much trouble, necessitating careful horsemanship and slow traveling.

Reaching the hills without mishaps, the horses were left near an old tomb in charge of the servants. The Raja, Bently, Lal Das, and two Rajputs continued afoot. They first followed a bullock trail, and then a narrow foot-path, one of the Rajputs acting as guide. The path, winding up and down, through cactus jungle, deep ravines, and among great boulders, led well into the hills.

The moon had risen, and as they emerged from a patch of jungle, Bently saw the cave temple of which Chumbu Singh had spoken. It was in a steep hillside, where the formation changed from sandstone to light granite. In front was a level space overgrown with cactus, jungle plants, and a few larger trees. There were three entrances, the central one being about fifteen feet high, and the other two smaller. The larger one was open, but the others were choked with debris.

The hunters toiled up the hillside, scrambling over boulders and through the thick scrub. There was no path, and it was not pleasant

traveling. A handful of cactus spines, even on a moonlit night in the presence of ancient and interesting ruins, is more productive of profanity than enthusiasm.

"This is the ancient temple of Jains," said the Raja when they at last came panting to the entrance.

Bently peered within to behold the moonlight shining on huge indistinct figures, old forgotten gods carved in the solid granite. There were also great footprints in the thick dust, evidently those of the tiger. Undoubtedly he was a monster animal, for Bently had never seen pads to equal them.

The two Rajputs examined the pads carefully, and gave it as their opinion that the tiger had crept forth, bent on stalking about nightfall, and would probably not return until morning. They were sure he was not in the cave. The Raja seemed annoyed at the prospect of a long wait, and abused the Rajputs for not arranging matters so that they might have arrived at the cave earlier and so intercepted the tiger.

"I owe you many apologies," he said, turning Bently. "You see what comes of trusting to these fellows. But since it is such an effort to get here, I suggest that we wait for the tiger."

"Certainly," agreed Bently. "I am willing to wait as long as you like for a shot at that beast."

"Very well," the Raja nodded. "In the meantime suppose we take a look at the cave temple. It is an interesting place, of its kind without equal in India."

To this Bently readily assented. Thereupon the Raja sent off one of the Rajputs and Lal Das with an order for the rest of the retainers to keep watch in case the tiger returned unexpectedly. The other Rajput then produced a torch, and the party of three entered the cave. First they passed through a sort of peristyle, or antechamber, which, thirty yards from the entrance, opened into a vast grotto. This was the main excavation. Huge stone pillars, elaborately sculptured, supported the roof, and around the sides great gods and goddesses of the Jain mythology, called Arhats, glared downward. The torch illuminated dimly, leaving much in shadow, and in the shadow imagination created strange fantasies. A narrow passage from the grotto ended in a smaller chamber littered with fallen fragments. It was more than once necessary to climb over some god whose face was in the dust. Another short passage led to an arched entrance two-thirds blocked with debris.

"We cannot go any further," said the Raja, "but if you take the torch and climb up on that pile, you will be able to see into a greater cave beyond. My superstitious retainers believe that it is the abode of ghosts and devils, the guardians of the temple."

Bently's curiosity was stimulated. Torch in hand he surmounted the obstruction, and peered into a gulf of black darkness. He seemed on the verge of a great precipice, the limits and bottom of which the torchlight failed to reach. From far beneath he fancied he caught a splash of water tumbling over a rocky bed, and strange echoes floated upward, but he could see nothing. It was an appalling abyss, which, for all he knew, might sink into the foundations of the earth.

Suddenly he received a violent push from behind, accompanied by a muttered curse hurled from the Raja's lips. Bently tumbled forward, and, in doing so, threw out an arm wildly to save himself. It caught the barrel of the Raja's rifle, swept it from his grasp, and hurled it clattering into the chasm beneath. Bently promptly followed the Raja's rifle down a steep crumbling slope to what would have been certain death, had his own rifle not brought him up with a jerk by becoming lodged to half its length between two rocks. As it were, there he hung in mid-air with the buttress of his rifle for his only support. A shower of following pebbles swept on down into nothingness.

For some moments he remained almost stunned by the peril of the situation, but presently his mind began to gather in the slender chances of escape. He had apparently been brought up with his back against a side-wall of rock and with one foot resting on a narrow projection. Reaching out a hand, and groping with it, he discovered that the narrow projection was one of a flight of irregular steps cut in the rock and leading upward. If a hazardous foothold, he presumed it had been used at some period, and decided to tempt it course.

He balanced himself carefully, and disengaging his rifle, crept slowly upward step by step. Once his foot slipped, and he almost fell, but throwing himself inward he found he had stumbled into the entrance of a narrow passage. That meant safety from the chasm at any rate, and he gave vent to a huge breath of relief. His next act was to test the springs of his rifle, and so far as he was able to judge in the darkness he was further gratified to find that it was uninjured. Then he went cautiously forward, guiding his progress by a hand on the side-wall. Presently he came to a broad flight of steps partly choked up with fallen debris.

Climbing up this, he emerged into the grotto of the temple.

Then he drew back suddenly. A coughing snarl echoed through the cavern. Bently softly moved behind the stone image of a god, and looked out from its shadow. From a clift in the roof of the temple a stream of moonlight fell within, and toned with silver the yellow body and velvet stripes of a monster tiger. It also shone upon the prostrate forms of the Raja and his Rajput retainer, held beneath the huge paws of the Lord of the Jungle. Again the coughing snarl echoed through the temple. The eyes of the beast flashed with savage thirst for blood as it lowered its head to plunge its fangs into the throat of one of its victims.

Bently raised his rifle to the shoulder, took steady aim, and fired. A terrific roar shook the stone gods, a gigantic convulsion seized upon the body of the tiger as it rolled over. Bently fired again, and then strode from his place of concealment. Another shot at closer range finished the death struggle of the tiger. Its last breath went forth in a choking growl of defiance.

It took but a cursory examination to convince Bently that both the Raja and the Rajput were past rendering any account of their treachery on this earth, and a lack of response to his shouts made it plain that the Raja's retainers had promptly bolted when the tiger unexpectedly returned. The Raja and the Rajput has thus been left to encounter the powerful beast unarmed.

How Bently regained the Residency was a matter he was unable to explain except by instinct, but daylight had already broken when he reached the compound. Then he acted with swift decision.

He sent orders for the Raja's retainers to appear at the Residency for an investigation, which eventually led to a thorough exploration of the temple. By another entrance the bottom of the abyss was gained, and sundry relics discovered there proved how the Raja had relieved himself of the undesirable presence of those who had interfered with his dubious proceedings.

SOMETHING NEW

"TELL me something new," she moaned, twisting in his arms on the sofa. "Say or do something original—and I'll love you. Anything but the wheezy gags, the doddering compliments, the kisses that were stale before Antony passed them off on Cleopatra!"

"Alas," he said, "there is nothing new in the world except the rose and gold and ivory of your perfect loveliness. And there is nothing original except my love for you."

"Old stuff," she sneered, moving away from him. "They all say that."

"They?" he queried, jealously.

"The ones before you, of course," she replied, in a tone of languid reminiscence. "It only took four lovers to convince me of the quotidian sameness of man. After that, I always knew what to expect. It was maddening: they came to remind me of so many cuckoo clocks, with the eternal monotony of their advances, the punctuality of their compliments. I soon knew the whole repertory. As for kissing—each one began with my hands, and ended with my lips. There was one genius, though, who kissed me on the throat the first time. I might have taken him, if he had lived up to the promise of such a beginning."

"What shall I say?" he queried, in despair. "Shall I tell you that your eyes are the unwaning moons above the cypress-guarded lakes of dreamland? Shall I say that your hair is colored like the sunsets of Cocaigne?"

She kicked off one of her slippers, with a little jerk of disgust.

"You aren't the first poet that I've had for a lover. One of them used

to read me that sort of stuff by the hour. All about moons, and stars, and sunsets, and rose-leaves and lotus-petals."

"Ah," he cried hopefully, gazing at the slipperless foot. "Shall I stand on my head and kiss your tooty-wootsies?"

She smiled briefly. "That wouldn't be so bad. But you're not an acrobat, my dear. You'd fall over and break something—provided you didn't fall on me."

"Well, I give it up," he muttered, in a tone of hopeless resignation. "I've done my damdest to please you for the past four months; and I've been perfectly faithful and devoted, too; I haven't so much as looked corner-wise at another woman—not even that blue-eyed brunette who tried to vamp me at the Artists' Ball the other night."

She sighed impatiently. "What does that matter? I am sure you needn't be faithful unless you want to be. As for pleasing me—well, you did give a thrill once upon a time, during the first week of our acquaintance. Do you remember? We were lying out under the pines on the old rug that we had taken with us; and you suddenly turned to me and asked me if I would like to be a hamadryad . . . Ah! there is a hamadryad in every women; but it takes a faun to call it forth . . . My dear, if you had only been a faun!"

"A real faun would have dragged you off by the hair," he growled, "So you wanted some of that caveman stuff, did you? I suppose that's what you mean by 'something new.' "

"Anything, anything, providing it is new," she drawled, with ineffable languor. Looking like a poem to Ennui by Baudelaire, she leaned back and lit another cigarette in her holder of carved ivory.

He look at her, and wondered if any one female had ever before hidden so much perversity, capriciousness, and incomprehensibility behind a rose-bud skin and harvest-coloured hair. A sense of acute exasperation mounted in him—something that had smouldered for months, half-restrained by his natural instincts of chivalry and gentleness. He remembered an aphorism from Nietzsche: "When thou goest to women, take thy whip."

"By Jove, the old boy had the right dope," he thought. "Too bad I didn't think to take my whip with me; but after all, I have my hands, and a little rough stuff can't make matters any worse."

Aloud, he said: "It's a pity no one ever thought to give you a good paddling. All women are spoiled and perverse, more or less, but you—"

He broke off, and drew her across his knees like a naughty child, with a movement so muscular and sudden that she had neither the time nor the impulse to resist or cry out.

"I'm going to give you the spanking of your life," he growled, as his right hand rose and descended . . . The cigarette holder fell from her lips to the Turkish carpet, and began to burn a hole in the flowered pattern. . . . A dozen smart blows, with a sound like the clapping of shingles, and then he released her, and rose to his feet. His anger had vanished, and his only feeling was an overpowering sense of shame and consternation. He could merely wonder how and why he had done it.

"I suppose you will never forgive me," he began.

"Oh, you are wonderful," she breathed. "I didn't think you had it in you. My faun! My cave-man! Do it again."

Doubly dumbfounded as he was, he had enough presence of mind to adjust himself to the situation. "Women are certainly the limit," he thought, dazedly. "But one must make the best of them, and miss no chances."

Preserving a grim and mysterious silence, he picked her up in his arms.

THE JUSTICE OF THE ELEPHANT

NIKHAL *Singh*, Rajah of Anapur, was acquiring the obese complacency of middle age; and his memories were blurred and befogged by a liberal use of Rajput opium. It was seldom that he recalled Ameera; though, as a general rule, an unfaithful woman is not the easiest thing in the world to forget. But Nikhal Singh had possessed so many wives and concubines; and one more or less was of no great importance, even though she had been eyed like the sloe and footed like the gazelle and had preferred an elephant-driver to a Rajah. And as Nikhal Singh grew older, and became wearier of women and fonder of opium, such matters were even less memorable or worthy of consideration.

However, the incident had angered him greatly at the time; and the doom he devised for Ameera was the most atrocious one conceivable. Her story was long remembered and whispered in the royal zenana; though whether or not the example had served to deter others from similar derelictions is a moot problem.

Ameera was a dancing-girl, and therefore of low birth; and her rise in the Rajah's favor had not been regarded with unqualified approval by his legitimate wives. Under the circumstances, it was highly unwise for Ameera to carry on a love affair with the comely young elephant-driver, Rama Das; for there were many jealous eyes to note the amour, and jealous tongues to bear tattle thereof to Nikhal Singh. Ameera had been watched; and a man was seen leaving her apartments in the early morning hours. The man was not positively identified as Rama Das; but the

presence of anyone save the Rajah in those sacrosanct purlieus was enough to damn the unfortunate girl.

The punishment inflicted by Nikhal Singh was no less swift than dreadful. The girl was condemned to a death usually reserved for the lowest criminals; and her suspected lover, Rama Das, by a refinement of Rajput cruelty, was chosen to her executioner. She was made to kneel and place her head on a block of stone in the palace courtyard; and thereupon the great elephant ridden by Rama Das, at a signal from the driver, lifted one of his enormous hoofs and brought it down on the head of the dancing-girl, crushing her to an instant pulp. During the awful ordeal, no sign of recognition or emotion was betrayed either by Rama Das or Ameera; and the gloating Rajah was perhaps disappointed in this respect. A day or two afterward the young elephant-driver disappeared from Anapur; and no one knew whether he had been secretly made away with by Nikhal Singh or had vanished of his own accord.

Ten years had now passed; and the affair was overlaid, even in the minds of the Rajah's eldest wives, by a score of later scandals and by the petty happenings of the palace. And when the position of mahout to Ragna, the huge elephant that bore the Rajah himself on all formal occasions, became vacant through death, no one would have connected the half-forgotten Rama Das with the new applicant, Ram Chandar, who vowed his fitness to take charge of Ragna and offered credentials testifying to years of faithful and efficient service to the Maharajah of a state in Bundelcund. And least of all would it have occurred to Nikhal Singh himself that the grave, taciturn, heavy-bearded Ram Chandar and the blithe, beardless Rama Das were the same person.

Somehow, though there were many other applicants, Ram Chandar insinuated himself into the desired position. And since he was a competent driver, who had obviously mastered the language of elephants down to its last and most subtle inflection, no one, not even his fellow mahouts, found reason to disapprove or criticize his appointment. Ragna also appeared to like his new driver; and that ideal confidence and understanding which often exists between the mahout and the animal soon sprang up between these two. Ragna, after the fashion of a well-tutored elephant, was wise and erudite in regard to all that it was proper for him to know; but he learned some new manners and graces beneath the instruction of Ram Chandar; and was even taught in private one or two tricks that are not usually part of the curriculum of a state

elephant. Of these latter, no one dreamt; and Ram Chandar preserved an inscrutable silence. And Nikhal Singh was wholly unaware of the strange, sardonic, sinister regard with which he was watched by the new mahout from Bundelcund.

Nikhal Singh had grown fonder than ever of his opium, and cared less and less for other pleasures or distractions. But now, in his fortieth year, for political reasons, it was agreed upon by his ministers that he must take another wife. The Ranee had recently died without leaving him a male heir; and the young daughter of the neighboring Rajah of Ayalmere was selected as her successor. All the necessary arrangements and elaborate protocols were made; and the day was set for the marriage. Nikhal Singh was secretly bored by the prospect but was publicly resigned to his royal duty. The feelings of the bride, perhaps, were even more problematical.

The day of the marriage dawned in torrid saffron. A great procession coming from Ayalmere was to bring the bride into Anapur; and Nikhal Singh, with another stately procession, was to meet her outside the gates of his capital.

It was a gorgeous ceremony. Nikhal Singh, seated in a golden and jewel-crusted howdah on the superb elephant Ragna, passed through the streets of Anapur followed by the court dignitaries on other elephants and a small army of horsemen, all splendidly caparisoned. There was much firing of jezails and cannon by the soldiers and banging of musical instruments among the populace. The mahout, Ram Chandar, grave and impassive as usual, sat on Ragna's neck. Nikhal Singh, who had fortified himself with a large lump of his favorite drug, was equally impassive on his broidered cushions in the howdah.

The procession emerged through the open gate of Anapur, and beheld at some distance, in a cloud of summer dust, the approach of the bride and her attendants, forming an array no less magnificent and sumptuous than that which was headed by Nikhal Singh.

As the two processions neared each other, an event occurred which was not a pre-arranged part of the ceremonial. At a secret signal from Ram Chandar, perceived and understood only by the elephant himself, Rana suddenly halted, reached into the great howdah with his trunk, seized Nikhal Singh in a tenacious embrace, and haling the Rajah forth in a most undignified and ignominious manner, deposited him on his knees in the road and forced him to bow his head in the dust before the

bride's approaching litter. Then, almost before his action was comprehended by the stupefied throng, Ragna raised one of his front hoofs and calmly proceeded to crush the Rajah's head into a flat, formless jelly. Then, trumpeting wildly, menacing all who stood in his way, and apparently defying the frantic signals and commands of his driver, Ragna plunged through the crowd and quickly vanished in the near-by jungle, still carrying Ram Chandar and the empty howdah.

Amid the confusion and consternation that prevailed, it was assumed that Ragna had been seized by the vicious madness to which elephants are sometimes liable. When a semblance of order had been restored, he was followed by a troop of the Rajah's horsemen, armed with jezails. They found him an hour later, browsing peacefully in a jungle-glade without his driver, and dispatched him with a volley, not trusting his appearance of renewed mildness.

The assumption that Ragna had gone *musth* was universal; and no one thought of Rama Das and the death of Ameera, ten years before. However, the disappearance of the new mahout, Ram Chandar, was no less a mystery than the earlier vanishment of Rama Das, if anyone had remembered to draw the parallel. The body of Ram Chandar was never found, and no one knew to a certainty whether he had been killed by Ragna in the thick jungle or had run away from Anapur through fear of being held responsible for Ragna's behavior. But mad elephants are prone to wreak their malignity on all accessible victims, even their own mahouts; so it was considered very unlikely that Ram Chandar could have escaped.

THE KISS OF ZORAIDA

WITH one backward look at the bowery suburbs of Damascus, and the street that was peopled only by the long, faint shadows of a crescent moon, Selim dropped from the high wall among the leafing almonds and flowering lilacs of Abdur Ali's garden. The night was almost sultry, and the air was steeped with a distilled languor of voluptuous perfume. Even if he had been in some other garden, in another city, Selim could not have breathed that perfume without thinking of Zoraida, the young wife of Abdur Ali. Evening after evening, for the past fortnight, during her lord and master's absence, she had met him among the lilacs, till he had grown to associate the very odor of her hair and the savor of her lips with their fragrance.

The garden was silent, except for a silver-lisping fountain; and no leaf or petal stirred in the balmy stillness. Abdur Ali had gone to Aleppo on urgent business and was not expected back for several more days; so the slightly tepid thrill of anticipation which Selim felt was untinged by any thought of danger. The whole affair, even from the beginning, had been as safe as that sort of thing could possibly be: Zoraida was Abdur Ali's wife, so there were no jealous women who might tattle to their common lord; and the servants and eunuchs of the household, like Zoraida herself, hated the severe and elderly jewel-merchant. It had been unnecessary even to bribe them into complaisance. Everything and everyone had helped to facilitate the amour. In fact, it was all too easy; and Selim was beginning to weary a little of this heavy-scented garden and the oversweet affection of Zoraida. Perhaps he would not

come again after tonight, or tomorrow night. . . . There were other women, no less fair than the jeweler's wife, whom he had not kissed so often . . . or had not kissed at all.

He stepped forward among the flower-burdened bushes. Was there a figure standing in the shadow, near the fountain? The figure was dim, and darkly muffled, but it must be Zoraida. She had never failed to meet him there, she was ever the first at their rendezvous. Sometimes she had taken him into the luxurious harem; and sometimes, on warm evenings like this, they had spent their long hours of passion beneath the stars, amid the lilacs and almonds.

As Selim approached, he wondered why she did not rush to meet him, as was her wont. Perhaps she had not yet seen him. He called softly: "Zoraida!"

The waiting figure emerged from the shadow. It was not Zoraida, but Abdur Ali. The faint moon-rays glinted on the dull iron barrel and bright silver frettings of a heavy pistol which the old merchant held in his hand.

"You wish to see Zoraida?" The tone was harsh, metallically bitter.

Selim, to say the least, was taken aback. It was all too plain that his affair with Zoraida had been discovered, and that Abdur Ali had returned from Aleppo before the appointed time to catch him in a trap. The predicament was more than disagreeable, for a young man who had thought to spend the evening with a much-enamoured mistress. And Abdur Ali's direct query was disconcerting. Selim was unable to think of an apt or judicious answer.

"Come, thou shalt see her." Selim felt the jealous fury, but not the savage irony, that underlay the words. He was full of unpleasant premonitions, most of which concerned himself rather than Zoraida. He knew that he could not look for mercy from this austere and terrible old man; and the probabilities before him were such as to preclude more than a passing thought of what might have befallen, or would befall, Zoraida. Selim was something of an egoist; and he could hardly have claimed (except for the ear of Zoraida) that he was deeply in love. His self-solicitude, under the circumstances, was perhaps to be expected, even if not wholly to be admired.

Abdur Ali had covered Selim with the pistol. The young man realized uncomfortably that he himself was unarmed, except for his yataghan. Even as he was remembering this, two more figures came for-

ward from amid the lilac-shadows. They were the eunuchs, Cassim and Mustafa, who guarded Abdur Ali's harem, and whom the lovers believed friendly to their intrigue. Each of the giant blacks was armed with a drawn simitar. Mustafa stationed himself at Selim's right hand and Cassim at his left. He could see the whites of their eyes as they watched him with impassable vigilance.

"Now," said Abdur Ali, "you are about to enjoy the singular privilege of being admitted to my harem. This privilege, I believe, you have arrogated to yourself on certain former occasions, and without my knowledge. Tonight I shall grant it myself; though I doubt if there are many who would follow my example. Come: Zoraida is waiting for you, and you must not disappoint her, nor delay any longer. You are later than usual at the rendezvous, as I happen to know."

With the blacks beside him, with Abdur Ali and the levelled pistol in his rear, Selim traversed the dim garden and entered the courtyard of the jewel-merchant's house. It was like a journey in some evil dream; and nothing appeared wholly real to the young man. Even when he stood in the harem interior, by the soft light of Saracenic lamps of wrought brass, and saw the familiar divans with their deep-hued cushions and coverings, the rare Turkoman and Persian rugs, the taborets of Indian ebony freaked with precious metals and mother-of-pearl, he could not dispel his feeling of strange dubiety.

In his terror and bewilderment, amid the rich furnishings and somber splendor, he did not see Zoraida for a moment. Abdur Ali perceived his confusion and pointed to one of the couches.

"Hast thou no greeting for Zoraida?" The low tone was indescribably sardonic and ferocious.

Zoraida, wearing the scanty harem costume of bright silks in which she was wont to receive her lover, was lying on the sullen crimson fabrics of the divan. She was very still, and seemed to be asleep. Her face was whiter than usual, though she had always been a little pale; and the soft, child-like features, with their hint of luxurious roundness, wore a vaguely troubled expression, with a touch of bitterness about the mouth. Selim approached her, but she did not stir.

"Speak to her," snarled the old man. His eyes burned like two spots of slowly eating fire in the brown and crumpled parchment of his face.

Selim was unable to utter a word. He had begun to surmise the truth; and the situation overwhelmed him with a horrible despair.

"What?" thou hast no greeting for one who loved thee so dearly?" The words were like the dripping mf some corrosive acid.

"What has thou done to her?" said Selim after a while. He could not look at Zoraida any longer; nor could he lift his eyes to meet those of Abdur Ali.

"I have dealt with her very gently. As thou seest, I have not marred in any wife the perfection of her beauty—there is no wound, and not even the mark of a blow, on her white body. Was I not more generous . . . to leave her thus . . . for thee?"

Selim was not a coward, as men go; yet he gave an involuntary shudder.

"But . . . thou hast not told me."

"It was a rare and precious poison, which slays immediately and with little pain. A drop of it would have been enough—or even so much as still remains upon her lips. She drank it of her own choice. I was merciful to her—as I shall be to thee."

"I am at thy disposal," said Selim with all the hardihood he could muster.

The jewel-dealer's face became a mask of malignity, like that of some avenging fiend.

"My eunuchs know their master, and they will slice thee limb from limb and member from member if I give the word."

Selim looked at the two negroes. They returned his gaze with impassive eyes that were utterly devoid of all interest, either friendly or unfriendly. The light ran without a quiver along their gleaming muscles and upon their glittering swords.

"What is thy will? Dost thou mean to kill me?"

"I have no intention of slaying thee myself. Thy death will come from another source."

Selim looked again at the armed eunuchs.

"No, it will not be that—unless you prefer it."

"In Allah's name, what doest thou mean, then?" The tawny brown of Selim's face had turned ashen with horror of suspense.

"Thy death will be one which any true lover would envy," said Abdur Ali.

Selim was powerless to ask another question. His nerves were beginning to crumble under the ordeal. The dead woman on the couch, the malevolent old man with his baleful half-hints and his obvious implaca-

bility, the muscular negroes who would hew a man into collops at their master's word—all were enough to break down the courage of hardier men than he.

He became aware that Abdur Ali was speaking once more.

"I have brought thee to thy mistress. But it would seem that thou art not a very ardent lover."

"In the name of the Prophet, cease thy mockery."

Abdur Ali did not seem to hear the tortured cry.

"It is true, of course, that she could not reply even if thou shouldst speak to her. But her lips are as fair as ever, even if they are growing a little cold with thy unlover-like delay. Hast thou no kiss to lay upon them, in memory of all the other kisses they have taken—and given?"

Selim was again speechless. Finally:

"But you said there was a poison which—"

"Yes, and I told thee the truth. Even the touch of thy lips to hers, where a trace of the poison lingers, will be enough to cause thy death." There was an awful gloating in Abdur Ali's voice.

Selim shivered and looked again at Zoraida. Aside from her utter stillness and pallor, and the faintly bitter expression about the mouth, she differed in no apparent wise from the woman who had lain so often in his arms. Yet the very knowledge that she was dead was enough to make her seem unspeakably strange and even repulsive to Selim. It was hard to associate this still, marmoreal being with the affectionate mistress who had always welcomed him with eager smiles and caresses.

"Is there no other way?" Selim's question was little louder than a whisper.

"There is none. And you delay too long." Abdur Ali made a sign to the negroes, who stepped closer to Selim, lifting their swords in the lamplight.

"Unless thou dost my bidding, thy hands will be sliced off at the wrists," the jeweler went on. "The next blows will sever a small portion of each forearm. Then a brief attention will be given to other parts, before returning to the arms. I am sure thou wilt prefer the other death."

Selim stooped above the couch where Zoraida lay. Terror—the abject terror of death—was his one emotion. He had wholly forgotten his love for Zoraida, had forgotten her kisses and endearments. He feared the strange, pale woman before him as much as he had once desired her.

"Make haste." The voice of Abdur Ali was steely as the lifted simitars.

Selim bent over and kissed Zoraida on the mouth. Her lips were not entirely cold, but there was a queer, bitter taste. Of course, it must the poison. The thought was hardly formulated when a searing agony seemed to run through all his veins. He could no longer see Zoraida, in the blinding flames that appeared before him and filled the room like ever-widening suns; and he did not know that he had fallen forward on the couch across her body. Then the flames began to shrink with great swiftness and went out in a swirl of soft gloom. Selim felt that he was sinking into a great gulf, and that someone (whose name he could not remember) was sinking beside him. Then, all at once, he was alone, and was losing even the sense of solitude . . . till there was nothing but darkness and oblivion.

A TALE OF SIR JOHN MAUNDEVILLE

Foreword

This tale was suggested by the reading of "The Voyages and Travels of Sir John Maundeville," in which the fantastic realm of Abchaz and the darkness-covered province of Hanyson are actually described! I recommend this colourful fourteenth-century book to lovers of fantasy. Sir John even tells, in one chapter, how diamonds propagate themselves! Truly, the world was a wonderful place in those times, when almost everyone believed in the verity of such marvels.

Now in his journeying Sir John Maundeville had passed well to one side of that remarkable province in the kingdom of Abchaz which was called Hanyson; and, unless he was greatly deceived by those of whom he had inquired the way, could deem himself within two days' travel of that neighboring realm of Georgia.

He had seen the river that flowed out from Hanyson, a land of hostile idolators on which there lay the curse of perpetual darkness; and wherein, it was told, the voices of people, the crowing of cocks and the neighing of horses had sometimes been heard by those who approached its confines. But he had not paused to investigate the verity of these marvels; since the direct route of his journey was through another region; and also Hanyson was a place which no man, not even the most hardy, would care to enter without need.

However, as he pursued his wayfaring with the two Armenian Christians who formed his retinue, he began to hear from the inhabitants of

that portion of Abchaz the rumor of an equally dread demesne, named Antchar, lying before him on the road to Georgia. The tales they told were both vague and frightful, and were of varying import; some said that this country was a desolation peopled only by the liches of the dead and by loathly phantoms; others, that it was subject to the ghouls and afrits, who devoured the dead and would suffer no living mortal to trespass upon their dominions; and still others spoke of things all too hideous to be described, and of dire necromancies that prevailed even as the might of emperors doth prevail in more usually ordered lands. And the tales agreed only in this, that Antchar had been within mortal memory one of the fairest domains of Abchaz, but had been utterly laid waste by an unknown pestilence, so that its high cities and broad fields were long since abandoned to the desert and to such devils and other creatures as inhabit waste places. And the tellers of the tales agreed in warning Sir John to avoid this region and to take the road which ran deviously to the north of Antchar; for Antchar was a place into which no man had gone in latter times.

The good knight listened gravely to all these, as was his wont; but being a stout Christian, and valorous withal, he would not suffer them to deter him from his purpose. Even when the last inhabited village had been left behind, and he came to the division of the ways, and saw verily that the highway into Antchar had not been trodden by man or beast for generations, he refused to change his intention but road forward stoutly while the Armenians followed with much protest and trepidation.

Howbeit, he was not blind to the sundry disagreeable tokens that began to declare themselves along the way. There were neither trees; herbs nor lichens anywhere, such as would grow in any wholesome land; but low hills mottled with a leprosy of salt, and ridges bare as the bones of the dead.

Anon he came to a pass where the hills were strait and steep on each hand, with pinnacled cliffs of a dark stone crumbling slowly into dust and taking shapes of wild horror and strangeness, of demonry and Satanry as they crumbled. There were faces in the stone, having the semblance of ghouls or goblins, that appeared to move and twist as the travellers went by; and Sir John and his companions were troubled by the aspect of these faces and the similitudes which they bore to one another. So much alike, indeed, were many of them, that it seemed as if their

first exemplars were preceding the wayfarers, to mock them anew at each turn. And aside from those which were like ghouls or goblins, there were others having the features of heathen idols, uncouth and hideous to behold; and others still that were like the worm-gnawed visages of the dead; and these also appeared to repeat themselves on every hand in a doubtful and wildering fashion.

The Armenians would have turned back, for they swore that the rocks were alive and endowed with motion, in a land where naught else was living; and they sought to dissuade Sir John from his project. But he said merely, "Follow me, an ye will," and rode onward among the rocks and pinnacles.

Now, in the ancient dust of the unused road, they saw the tracks of a creature that was neither man nor any terrestrial beast; and the tracks were of such unwonted shape and number, and were so monstrous withal, that even Sir John was disquieted thereby; and perceiving them, the Armenians murmured more openly than before.

And now, as they pursued their way, the pinnacles of the pass grew tall as giants, and were riven into the likeness of mighty limbs and bodies, some of which were headless and others with heads of Typhoean enormity. And their shadows deepened between the travellers and the sun, to more than the umbrage of shadows cast by rocks. And in the darkest depth of the ravine, Sir John and his followers met a solitary jackal, which fled them not in the manner of its kind but passed them with articulate words, in a voice hollow and sepulchral as that of a demon, bidding them to turn back, since the land before them was an interdicted realm. All were much startled thereat, considering that this was indeed a thing of enchantment, for a jackal to speak thus, and being against nature, was fore-ominous of ill and peril. And the Armenians cried out, saying they would go no further; and when the jackal had passed from sight, they fled after it, spurring their horses like men who were themselves ridden by devils.

Seeing them thus abandon him, Sir John was somewhat wroth; and also he was perturbed by the warning of the jackal; and he liked not the thought of faring alone into Antchar. But, trusting in our Saviour to forfend him against all harmful enchantments and the necromancies of Satan, he rode on among the rocks until he came forth at length from their misshapen shadows; and emerging thus, he saw before him a grey plain that was like the ashes of some dead land under extinguished heavens.

At sight of this region, his heart misgave him sorely, and he misliked it even more than the twisted faces of the rocks and riven forms of the pinnacles. For here the bones of men, of horses and camels, had marked the way with their pitiable whiteness; and the topmost branches of long dead trees arose like supplicative arms from the sand that had sifted upon the older gardens. And here there were ruinous houses, with doors open to the high-drifting desert, and mausoleums sinking slowly in the dunes. And here, as Sir John rode forward, the sky darkened above him, though not with the passage of clouds or the coming of the simoon, but rather with the strange dusk of midmost eclipse, wherein the shadows of himself and his horse were blotted out, and the tombs and houses were wan as phantoms.

Sir John had not ridden much further, when he met a horned viper, or cerastes, crawling toilsomely away from Antchar in the deep dust of the road. And the viper spoke as it passed him, saying with a human voice, "Be warned, and go not onward to Antchar, for this is a realm forbidden to all mortal beings except the dead."

Now did Sir John address himself in prayer to God the Highest, and to Jesus Christ our Saviour and all the blessed Saints, knowing surely that he had arrived in a place that was subject to Satanical dominion. And while he prayed, the gloom continued to thicken, till the road before him was half nighted and was no longer easy to discern. And though he would have still ridden on, his charger halted in the gloom and would not respond to the spur, but stood and trembled like one who is smitten with palsy.

Then, from the twilight that was nigh to darkness, there came gigantic figures, muffled and silent and having, as he thought, neither mouths nor eyes beneath the brow-folds of their sable cerements. They uttered no word, nor could Sir John bespeak them in the fear that came upon him; and likewise he was powerless to draw his sword. And they plucked him from his saddle with fleshless hands, and led him away, half swooning at the horror of their touch, on paths that he perceived only with the dim senses of one who goes down into the shadow of death. And he knew not how far they led him nor in what direction; and he heard no sound as he went, other than the screaming of his horse far off, like a soul in mortal dread and agony: for the footfalls of those who had taken him were soundless, and he could not tell if they were phantoms or haply were veritable demons. A coldness blew upon him, but without the whisper or soughing of wind; and the air he

breathed was dense with corruption and such odors as may emanate from a broken charnel.

For a time, in the faintness that had come upon him, he saw not the things that were standing beside the way, nor the shrouded shapes that went by in funeral secrecy. Then, recovering his senses a little, he perceived that there were houses about him and the streets of a town, though these were but scantly to be discerned in the night that had fallen without bringing the stars. However, he saw, or deemed, that there were high mansions and broad thoroughfares and markets; and among them, as he went on, a building that bore the appearance of a great palace, with a facade that glimmered vaguely, and domes and turrets half swallowed up by the lowering darkness.

As he neared the façade, Sir John saw that the glimmering came from within and was cast obscurely through open doors and between broad-spaced pillars. Too feeble was the light for torch or cresset, too dim for any lamp; and Sir John marvelled amid his faintness and terror. But when he had drawn closer still, he saw that the strange gleaming was like the phosphor bred by the putrefaction of a charnel.

Beneath the guidance of those who held him helpless, he entered the building. They led him through a stately hall, in whose carven columns and ornate furniture the opulence of kings was manifest; and thence he came into the great audience-room, with a throne of gold and ebony set on a high dais, all of which was illumed by no other light than the glimmering of decay. And the throne was tenanted, nor by any human lord of sultan, but a gray, prodigious creature, of height and bulk exceeding those of man, and having in all its over-swollen form the exact similitude of a charnel-worm. And the worm was alone, and except for the worm and Sir John and those beings who had brought him thither, the great chamber was empty as a mausoleum of old days, whose occupants were long since consumed by corruption.

Then, standing there with a horror upon him as no man had ever envisaged, Sir John became aware that the worm was scrutinizing him severely, with little eyes deep-folded in the obscene bloating of its face, and then, with a dreadful and solemn voice, it addressed him, saying:

"I am king of Antchar, by virtue of having conquered and devoured the mortal ruler thereof, as well as all those who were his subjects. Know then that this land is mine and that the intrusion of the living is unlawful and not readily to be condoned. The rashness and folly thou

hast shown in thus coming here is verily most egregious; since thou were warned by the people of Abchaz, and warned anew by the jackal and the viper which thou didst meet on the road to Antchar. Thy temerity hath earned a condign punishment. And before I suffer thee to go hence, I decree that thou shalt lie for a term among the dead, and dwell as they dwell, in a dark sepulcher, and learn the manner of their abiding and the things which none should behold with living eyes. Yea, still alive, it shall be thine to descend and remain in the very midst of death and putrefaction, for such length of time as seemeth meet to correct thy folly and punish thy presumption."

Sir John was one of the worthiest knights of Christendom, and his valor was beyond controversy. But when he heard the speech of the throned worm, and the judgement that it passed upon him, his fear became so excessive that once again he was nigh to swooning. And, still in this state, he was taken hence by those who had brought him to the audience-room. And somewhere in the outer darkness, in a place of tombs and graves and cenotaphs beyond the dim town, he was flung into a deep sepulcher of stone, and the brazen door of the sepulcher was closed upon him.

Lying there through the seasonless midnight, Sir John was companioned only by an unseen cadaver and by those ministrants of decay who were not yet wholly done with their appointed task. Himself as one half dead, in the sore extremity of his horror and loathing, he could not tell if it were day or night in Antchar; and in all the term of endless hours that he lay there, he heard no sound, other than the beating of his own heart, which soon became insufferably loud, and oppressed him like the noise and tumult of a great throng.

Appalled by the clamor of his heart, and affrighted by the thing which lay in perpetual silence beside him, and whelmed by the awesomeness and dire necromancy of all that had befallen him, Sir John was prone to despair, and scant was his hope of returning from that imprisonment amid the dead, or of standing once more under the sun as a living man. It was his to learn the voidness of death, to share the abomination of desolation, and to comprehend the unutterable mysteries of corruption; and to do all this not as one who is a mere insensible cadaver, but with soul and body still inseparate. His flesh crept, and his spirit cringed within him, as he felt the crawling of worms that went avidly to the dwindling corpse or came away in glutted slowness. And it

seemed to Sir John at that time (and at all times thereafter) that the condition of his sojourn in the tomb was verily to be accounted a worse thing than death.

At last, when many hours or days had gone over him, leaving the tomb's darkness unchanged by the entrance of any beam or the departure of any shadow, Sir John was aware of a sullen clangor, and knew that the brazen door had been opened. And now, for the first time, by the dimness of twilight that had entered the tomb, he saw in all its piteousness and repulsion the thing with which he had abode so long. In the sickness that fell upon him at this sight, he was haled forth from the sepulcher by those who had thrust him therein; and, fainting once more with the terror of their touch, and shrinking from their gigantic shadowy stature and cerements whose black folds revealed no human visage or form, he was led through Antchar along the road whereby he had come into that dolorous realm.

His guides were silent as before; and the gloom which lay upon the land was even as when he had entered it, and was like the umbrage of some eternal occultation. But at length, in the very place where he had been taken captive, he was left to retrace his own way and to fare alone through the land of ruinous gardens toward the defile of the crumbling rocks.

Weak though he was from his confinement, and all bemazed with the things which had befallen him, he followed the road till the darkness lightened once more and he came forth from its penumbral shadow beneath a pale sun. And somewhere in the waste he met his charger, wandering through the sunken fields that were covered up by the sand; and he mounted the charger and rode hastily away from Antchar through the pass of the strange boulders with mocking forms and faces. And after a time he came once more to the northern road by which travellers commonly went to Georgia; and he was rejoined by the two Armenians, who had waited on the confines of Antchar, praying for his secure deliverance.

Long afterwards, when he had returned from his wayfaring in the East and among the peoples of remote isles, he told of the kingdom of Abchaz in the book that related to his travels; and also he wrote the rein concerning the province of Hanyson. But he made no mention of Antchar, that kingdom of darkness and decay ruled by the throned worm.

THE GHOUL

DURING the reign of the Caliph Vathek, a young man of good repute and family, named Noureddin Hassan, was haled before the Cadi Ahmed ben Becar at Bussorah. Now Noureddin was a comely youth, of open mind and gentle mien; and great was the astonishment of the Cadi and of all others present when they heard the charges that were preferred against him. He was accused of having slain seven people, one by one, on seven successive nights, and of having left the corpses in a cemetery near Bussorah, where they were found lying with their bodies and members devoured in a fearsome manner, as if by jackals. Of the people he was said to have slain, three were women, two were traveling merchants, one was a mendicant, and one a gravedigger.

Ahmed ben Becar was filled with the learning and wisdom of honorable years, and withal was possessed of much perspicacity. But he was deeply perplexed by the strangeness and atrocity of these crimes and by the mild demeanor and well-bred aspect of Noureddin Hassan, which he could in no wise reconcile with them. He heard in silence the testimony of witnesses who had seen Noureddin bearing on his shoulders the body of a woman at yester-eve in the cemetery; and others who on several occasions had observed him coming from the neighborhood at unseemly hours when only thieves and murderers would be abroad. Then, having considered all these, he questioned the youth closely.

"Noureddin Hassan," he said, "thou hast been charged with crimes of exceeding foulness, which thy bearing and lineaments belie. Is there haply some explanation of these things by which thou canst clear thy-

self, or in some measure mitigate the heinousness of thy deeds, if so it be that thou art guilty? I adjure thee to tell me the truth in this matter."

Now Noureddin Hassan arose before the Cadi; and the heaviness of extreme shame and sorrow was visible on his countenance.

"Alas, O Cadi," he replied, "for the charges that have been brought against me are indeed true. It was I and no other, who slew these people; nor can I offer an extenuation of my act."

The Cadi was sorely grieved and astonished when he heard this answer.

"I must perforce believe thee," he said sternly. "But thou hast confessed a thing which will make thy name hence forward an abomination in the ears and mouths of men. I command thee to tell me why these crimes were committed, and what offense these persons had given thee, or what injury they had done to thee; or if perchance thou slewest them for gain, like a common robber."

"There was neither offense given nor injury wrought by any of them against me," replied Noureddin. "And I did not kill them for their money or belongings or apparel, since I had no need of such things, and, aside from that, have always been an honest man."

"Then," cried Ahmed ben Becar, greatly puzzled, "what was thy reason if it was none of these?"

Now the face of Noureddin Hassan grew heavier still with sorrow; and he bowed his head in a shamefaced manner that bespoke the utterness of profound remorse. And standing thus before the Cadi, he told this story:

The reversals of fortune, O Cadi, are swift and grievous, and beyond the foreknowing or advertence of man. Alas! for less than a fortnight agone I was the happiest and most guiltless of mortals, with no thought of wrongdoing toward anyone. I was wedded to Amina, the daughter of the jewel-merchant Aboul Cogia; and I loved her deeply and was much beloved by her in turn; and moreover we were at this time anticipating the birth of our first child. I had inherited from my father a rich estate and many slaves; the cares of life were light upon my shoulders; and I had, it would seem, every reason to count myself among those Allah had blest with an earthly foretaste of Heaven.

Judge, then, the excessive nature of my grief when Amina died in the same hour when she was to have been delivered. From that time, in the dire extremity of my lamentation, I was as one bereft of light and

knowledge; I was deaf to all those who sought to condole with me, and blind to their friendly offices.

After the burial of Amina my sorrow became a veritable madness, and I wandered by night to her grave in the cemetery near Bussorah and flung myself prostrate before the newly lettered tombstone, on the earth that had been digged that very day. My senses deserted me, and I knew not how long I remained on the damp clay beneath the cypresses, while the horn of a decrescent moon arose in the heavens.

Then, in my stupor of abandonment, I heard a terrible voice that bade me rise from the ground on which I was lying. And lifting my head a little, I saw a hideous demon of gigantic frame and stature, with eyes of scarlet fire beneath brows that were coarse as tangled rootlets, and fangs that overhung a cavernous mouth, and earth-black teeth longer and sharper than those of the hyena. And the demon said to me:

"I am a ghoul, and it is my office to devour the bodies of the dead. I have now come to claim the corpse that was interred today beneath the soil on which thou art lying in a fashion so unmannerly. Begone, for I have fasted since yester-night, and I am much anhungered."

Now, at the sight of this demon, and the sound of his dreadful voice, and the still more dreadful meaning of his words, I was like to have swooned with terror on the cold clay. But I recovered myself in a manner, and besought him, saying:

"Spare this grave, I implore thee; for she who lies buried therein is dearer to me than any living mortal; and I would not that her fair body should be the provendor of an unclean demon such as thou."

At this the ghoul was angered, and I thought that he would have done me some bodily violence. But again I besought him, swearing by Allah and Mohammed with many solemn oaths that I would grant him anything procurable and would do for him any favor that lay in the power of man if he would leave undespoiled the new-made grave of Amina. And the ghoul was somewhat mollified, and he said:

"If thou wilt indeed perform for me a certain service, I shall do as thou askest." And I replied:

"There is no service, whatsoever its nature, that I will not do for thee in this connection, and I pray thee to name thy desire."

Then the ghoul said: "It is this, that thou shalt bring me each night, for eight successive nights, the body of one whom thou hast slain with thine own hand. Do this, and I shall neither devour nor dig the body that lies interred hereunder."

Now was I seized by utter horror and despair, since I had bound myself in all honor to grant the ghoul his hideous requirement. And I begged him to change the terms of the stipulation, saying to him:

"Is it needful to thee, O eater of corpses, that the bodies should be those of people whom I myself have slain?"

And the ghoul said: "Yea, for all others would be the natural provendor of myself or of my kin in any event. I adjure thee by the promise thou hast given to meet me here tomorrow night, when darkness has wholly fallen or as soon thereafter as thou art able, bringing the first of the eight bodies."

So saying, he strode off among the cypresses, and began to dig in another newly made grave at a little distance from that of Amina.

I left the graveyard in even direr anguish than when I had come, thinking of that which I must do in fulfillment of my sworn promise, to preserve the body of Amina from the demon. I know not how I survived the ensuing day, torn as I was between sorrow for the dead and my horror of the coming night with its repugnant duty.

When darkness had descended I went forth by stealth to a lonely road near the cemetery; and waiting there amid the low-grown branches of the trees, I slew the first passer with a sword and carried his body to the spot appointed by the ghoul. And each night thereafter, for six more nights, I returned to the same vicinity and repeated this deed, slaying always the very first who came, whether man or woman, or merchant or beggar or gravedigger. And the ghoul awaited me on each occasion, and would begin to devour his provender in my presence, with small thanks and scant ceremony. Seven persons did I slay in all, till only one was wanting to complete the agreed number; and the person I slew yester-night was a woman, even as the witnesses have testified. All this I did with utmost repugnance and regret, and sustained only by the remembrance of my plighted word and the fate which would befall the corpse of Amina if I should break the bond.

This, O Cadi, is all my story. Alas! For these lamentable crimes have availed me not, and I have failed in wholly keeping my bargain with the demon, who will doubtless this night consume the body of Amina in lieu of the one corpse that is still lacking. I resign myself to thy judgment, O Ahmed ben Becar, and I beseech thee for no other mercy than that of death, wherewith to terminate my double grief and my twofold remorse.

When Noureddin Hassan had ended his narrative, the amazement of all who had heard him was verily multiplied, since no man could remember hearing a stranger tale. And the Cadi pondered for a long time and then gave judgment, saying:

"I must needs marvel at thy story, but the crimes thou hast committed are none the less heinous, and Iblis himself would stand aghast before them. However, some allowance must be made for the fact that thou hadst given thy word to the ghoul and wast bound as it were in honor to fulfill his demand, no matter how horrible its nature. And allowance must likewise be made for thy connubial grief which caused thee to forfend thy wife's body from the demon. Yet I cannot judge thee guiltless, though I know not the punishment which is merited in a case so utterly without parallel. Therefore, I set thee free, with this injunction, that thou shalt make atonement for thy crimes in the fashion that seemeth best to thee, and shalt render justice to thyself and to others in such degree as thou art able."

"I thank thee for this mercy," replied Noureddin Hassan; and he then withdrew from the court amid the wonderment of all who were present. There was much debate when he had gone, and many were prone to question the wisdom of the Cadi's decision. Some there were who maintained that Noureddin should have been sentenced to death without delay for his abominable actions though others argued for the sanctity of his oath to the ghoul, and would have exculpated him altogether or in part. And tales were told and instances were cited regarding the habits of ghouls and the strange plight of men who had surprised such demons in their nocturnal delvings. And again the discussion returned to Noureddin, and the judgment of the Cadi was once more upheld or assailed with divers arguments. But amid all this, Ahmed ben Becar was silent, saying only:

"Wait, for this man will render justice to himself and to all others concerned, as far as the rendering thereof is possible."

So indeed, it happened, for on the morning of the next day another body was found in the cemetery near Bussorah lying half-devoured on the grave of Noureddin Hassan's wife, Amina. And the body was that of Noureddin, self-slain, who in this manner had not only fulfilled the injunction of the Cadi but had also kept his bargain with the ghoul by providing the required number of corpses.

TOLD IN THE DESERT

OUT of the fiery furnace of the desert sunset, he came to meet our caravan. He and his camel were a single silhouette of shadow-like thinness that emerged above the golden-crested dunes and disappeared by turns in their twilight-gathering hollows. When he descended the last dune and drew near, we had paused for the night, and we were pitching our black tents and lighting our little fires.

The man and his dromedary were like mummies that could find no repose in the subterranes of death, and that had wandered abroad beneath the goading of a cryptic spur, ever since the first division of the desert from the town. The face of the man was withered and blackened as by the torrefaction of a thousand flames; his beard was gray as ashes; and his eyes were expiring embers. His clothing was like tatters of the ancient dead, like the spoils of ghoulish rag-pickers. His camel was a mangy, moth-eaten skeleton such as might bear the souls of the damned on their dolorous ride to the realms of Iblis.

We greeted him in the name of Allah and bade him welcome. He shared our meal of dates and coffee and dried goat-flesh; and later, when we sat in a circle beneath the crowding stars, he told us his tale in a voice that had somehow taken on the loneliness, the eerie quavers and disconsolate overtones of the desert wind, as it seeks among infinitely parching horizons for the fertile, spicy valleys it has lost and cannot find.

Of my birth, my youth, and the appelation by which I was known and perhaps renowned among men, it would now be bootless to speak:

for those days are one in remoteness with the reign of Al Raschid, they have gone by like the Afrit-builded halls of Suleiman. And in the bazaars or in the haems of my natal city, none would recall me; and if one spoke my name, it would be as a dying and never-repeated echo. And my own memories grow dim like the fires of hesternal wanderings, on which the sands are blown by an autumn gale.

But, though none will remember my songs, I was once a poet; and like other poets in their prime, I sang of vernal roses and autumnal rose-leaves, of the breasts of dead queens and the mouths of living cup-bearers, of stars that seek the fabled ocean-isles, and caravans that follow the eluding and illusory horizons. And because I was fevered with the strange disquietude of youth and poesy, for which there is neither name nor appeasement, I left the city of my boyhood, dreaming of other cities where wine and fame would be sweeter, and the lips of women more desirable.

It was a gallant and merry caravan with which I set forth in the month of the flowering of almonds. Wealthy and brave were the merchants with whom I travelled; and though they were lovers of gold and wrought ivory, of rugs and damascus blades and olibanum, they also loved my songs and could never weary of hearing them. And though our pilgrimage was long, it was evermore beguiled with recital of odes and telling of tales; and time was somehow cheated of its days, and distance of its miles, as only the divine necromancy of song can cheat them. And the merchants told me stories of the far-off, glamorous city which was our goal; and hearkening to their recountal of its splendors and delights, and pondering my own fancies, I was well content with the palmless leagues as they faded behind our dromedaries.

Alas! for we were never to behold the bourn of our journey, with its auriphrygiate domes that were said to ascend above the greening of paradisal trees, and its minarets of nacre beyond waters of jade. We were waylaid by the fierce tribesmen of the desert in a deep valley between hills; and though we fought valiantly, they bore us down from our hamstrung camels with their over-numbering spears; and taking our corded bales of merchandise, and deeming us all securely dead, they left us to the gier-eagles of the sand.

All but myself, indeed, had perished; and sorely wounded in the side, I lay among the dead as one on whom there descends the pall-like shadow of Azrael. But when the robbers had departed, I somehow

stanched my streaming wound with tatters of my torn raiment; and seeing that none stirred among my companions, I left them and tottered away on the route of our journey, sorrowing that so brave a caravan should have come to a death so inglorious. And beyond the defile in which we had been overtaktn with such dastardy, I found a camel who had strayed away during the conflict. Even as myself, the animal was maimed, and it limped on three legs and left a trail of blood. But I made it kneel, and mounted it.

Of the hours that ensued I remember little. Blinded with pain and weakness, I heeded not the route that the camel followed, whether it were the track of caravans or a desert-ending path of Bedouins or jackals. But dimly I recalled how the merchants had told me at morn that there were two days of travelling in a desolation where the way was marked by serried bones, ere we should reach the next oasis. And I knew not how I should survive so arduous a journey, wounded and without water; but I clung dizzily to the camel.

The red demons of thirst assailed me; and fever came, and delirium, to people the waste with phantasmogoric shadows. And I fled through aeons from the frightful immemorial Things that held lordship of the desert, and would have proffered me the green, beguiling cups of an awful madness with Their bone-white hands. And though I fled, They dogged me always; and I heard Them gibbering all around me in the air that had tuned to blood-red flame.

There were mirages on the waste; there were lucent meres and palms of fretted beryl that hovered always at an unattainable distance. I saw them in the interludes of my delirium; and one there was at length, which appeared greener and fairer than the rest; but I deemed it also an illusion. Yet it faded not nor receded like the others; and in each interval of my phantom-clouded fever it drew nearer still. And thinking it still a mirage, I approached the palms and the water; and a great blackness fell upon me, like the web of oblivion from the hands of the final Weaver; and I was henceforth bereft of sight and knowledge.

Waking, I deemed perforce that I had died and was in a sequestered nook of Paradise. For surely the sward on which I lay, and the waving verdure about me, were lovelier than those of earth; and the face that leaned above me was that of the youngest and most compassionate houri. But when I saw my wounded camel grazing not far away, and felt the reviving pain of my hurt, I knew that I still lived; and that the seeming mirage had been a veritable oasis.

Ah! fair and king as any houri was she who had found me lying on the desert's verge, when the riderless camel came to her hut amid the palms. Seeing that I had awakened from my swoon, she brought me water and fresh dates, and smiled like a mother as I ate and drank. And, uttering little cries of horror and pity, she bound my wound with the soothness of healing balsams.

Her voice was gentle as her eyes; and her eyes were those of a dove that has dwelt always in a vale of myrrh and cassia. When I had revived a little, she told me her name, which was Neria; and I deemed it lovelier and more melodious than the names of the sultanas who are most renowned in song, and remotest in time and fable. She said that she had lived from infancy with her parents amid the palms; and now her parents were dead, and there was none to companion her except the birds that nested and sang in the verdant frondage.

How shall I tell of the life that began for me now, while the spear-wound was mending? How shall I tell of the innocent grace, the child-like beauty, the maternal tenderness of Neria? It was a life remote from all the fevers of the world, and pure from every soilure; it was infinitely sweet and secure, as if in the whole of time and space there were no others than ourselves and naught that could ever trouble our happiness. My love for her, and hers for me, was inevitable as the flowering of the palms and their fruiting. Our hearts were drawn to each other with no shadow of doubt or reluctance; and the meeting of our mouths was simple as that of roses blown together by a summer wind.

We felt no needs, no hungers, other than those which were amply satisfied by the crystal well-water, by the purple fruit of the trees, and by each other. Ours were the dawns that poured through the feathering emerald of fronds; and the sunsets whose amber was flung on a blossom-purified sward more delicate than the rugs of Bokhara. Ours was the divine monotony of contentment, ours were the kisses and endearments ever the same in sweetness, yet illimitably various. Ours was a slumber enchanted by cloudless stars, and caresses without denial or regret. We spoke of naught but our love and the little things that filled our days; yet the words we uttered were more than the weighty discourse of the learned and the wise. I sang no more, I forgot my odes and ghazals; for life itself had become a sufficing music.

The annals of happiness are without event. I know not how long it was that I dwelt with Neria; for the days were molten together in a dulcet harmony of peace and rapture. I remember not if they were few

or many; since time was touched by a supernal sorcery, and was no longer time.

Alas! for the tiny whisper of discontent that awakens sooner or later in the bosoms of the blest, that is heard through the central melodies of heaven! There came a day when the little oasis seemed no longer the infinite paradise I had dreamt, when the kisses of Neria were as honey too often tasted, when her bosom was a myrrh too often breathed. The sameness of the days was no longer divine, the remoteness was no longer security but a prison-house. Beyond the fringed horizon of the trees there hovered the opal and marble dream of the storied cities I had sought in former time; and the voices of fame, the tones of sultana-like women, besought me with far, seductive murmurs. I grew sad and silent and distraught; and, seeing the change that was on me, Neria saddened also and watched me with eyes that had darkened like nocturnal wells in which there lingers a single star. But she uttered no breath of reproach or remonstrance.

At last, with halting words, I told her of my longing to depart; and, hypocrite that I was, I spoke of urgent duties that called me and would not be denied. And I promised with many oaths to return as soon as these duties would permit. The pallor of Neria's face, and the darkening of her violet-shadowed eyes, were eloquent of mortal sorrow. But she said only, "Go not, I pray thee. For if thou goest, thou shalt not find me again."

I laughed at her words and kissed her; but her lips were cold as those of the dead, they were unresponsive as if the estranging miles had already intervened. And I, too, was sorrowful when I rode away on my dromedary.

Of that which followed there is much, and yet little, to tell. After many days among the veering boundaries of the sand, I came to a far city; and there I abode for awhile and found in a measure the glory and delight of which I had dreamed. But amid the loud and clamoring bazaars, and across the silken whisper of harems, there returned to me the parting words of Neria; and her eyes besought me through the flame of golden lamps and the luster of opulent attire; and a nostalgia fell upon me for the lost oasis and the lips of abandoned love. And because of it I knew no peace; and after a time I returned to the desert.

I retraced my way with exceeding care, by the dunes and remotely scattered wells that marked the route. But when I thought to have

reached the oasis, and to see again the softly waving palms above Neria's abode, and the glimmering waters beside it, I saw no more than a stretch of featureless sand, where a lonely, futile wind was writing and erasing its aimless furrows. And I sought across the sand in every direction, till it seemed that I must overtake the very horizons as they fled; but I could not find a single palm, nor a blade of grass that was like the blossomy sward on which I had lain or wandered with Neria; and the wells to which I came were brackish with desolation and could never have held the crystalline sweetness of the well from which I had drunk with her. . . .

Since then, I know not how many suns have crossed the brazen hell of the desert; nor how many moons have gone down on the waters of mirage and marah. But still I seek the oasis; and still I lament the hour of careless folly in which I forsook its perfect paradise. To no man, mayhap, is it given to attain twice the happiness and security, remote from all that can trouble or assail, which I knew with Neria in a bygone year. And woe to him who abandons such, who becomes a voluntary exile from an irretrievable Aidann. For him, henceforward, there are only the fading visions of memory, the tortures and despairs and illusions of the quested miles, the waste whereon there falls no lightest shadow of any leaf, and the wells whose taste is fire and madness. . . .

We were all silent when the stranger ceased; and no one cared to speak. But among us all there was none who had not remembered the face of her to whom he would return when the caravan had ended its wayfaring.

After awhile, we slept; and we thought that the stranger also slumbered. But awakening before dawn, when a horned moon was low above the sands, we saw that the man and his dromedary had disappeared. And far-off in the ghostly light a doubtful shadow passed from dune to dune like a fever-driven phantom. And it seemed to us that the shadow was the single silhouette of a camel and its rider.

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